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**BASED ON A SIMULATION BY TPANGOLIN**

# Civilization Battle Royale: The Novel

Connor Cadellin McKee

Based on a simulation by Tpangolin

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## Prologue

4000 BC

King Nebuchadnezzar II- Lord of the Ice, the Watcher of the World- smiled as he swirled his drink. The omnipresent hum of nuclear engines rolled around him, deep as he was within the core of the *SS Observer*. Beyond the curved metal hull of the submarine, the black waters of the Antarctic churned with anticipation.

He paused for a moment, to appreciate the view before him. Sixty-one screens covered the walls of his office, providing breath-taking views of the world beyond. Decades, *centuries* of work had led him and his people to this moment, to this event. To this last hope.

He gazed at the pristine world out there- immaculate and bountiful with life. Deep rivers ran through the jungles of South America, bringing with them enough nutrients and minerals for the flourishing rainforest and abounding biodiversity. To the north, the jungles gave way to rich blue waters of the Caribbean, so clear and perfect one could almost see the bottom. Rich tropical islands gave way to the epic canyons, the plains and finally snow-capped mountains as he pushed further north, smiling as he beheld the beauty of the world. A true cradle of civilization.

“We’re almost ready to begin,” he mused, resting back in his throne for a moment. He allowed a quick glance back at the long table behind him, with sixty-one empty chairs. Today would be an event to remember; an event the *history books* would remember. After centuries of planning and construction, his people were ready. Ready to begin the greatest game ever undertaken, with everything at stake. He ran a hand through his long beard, resting a hand on the controls.

"Care to do the honours?" Em asked, standing to the side of his throne. Her long dark hair was tied in a bun behind her head, revealing smooth features. She laid a hand upon his shoulder.

Nebuchadnezzar answered only with a determined grin. He took a deep breath, and slammed his fist down upon the control panel. Tens of thousands of people burst into cheering and laughter across the enormous sub, and as one- the Babylonian people watched the opening moves unfold.

The games had begun.

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Sejong woke to the sound of the wind, running its ghostly fingers through the fabric of the tent around him. He pulled himself upright, shaking the fog from his mind. Where was he? He had no memory of how he came to this place.

He climbed to his feet, pushing his way through the blue and red tent flap. He squinted in the bright sunlight, a strange feeling building up in his chest. For some reason, it felt different this morning. As though he had never truly stepped into the sun before, and that all the days of the past had been mere dreams.

He stood there for a moment, admiring the view out across the Yellow Sea, the sun at his shoulders and long grass rippling at his feet. His people went about their daily duties in the forest of tents, their structures rolling down the hills like a curtain. Warriors practiced with their axes in a clearing off to the east, while workers gathered deadwood for fireplaces and tended crops. A group of villagers washed clothing in the stream that guarded their northern flank, and

laughing children wove around their ankles, chasing one another in some sort of game. It felt like the beginning of something.

This land was lush and fertile, and it seemed to welcome his people with open arms. Seoul, the settlement was called. Like the Yellow Sea, the name sounded *right* to him somehow.

Gazing out across those waters, he could just make out a landmass on the other side of it. An island? Perhaps it was more of the same land he stood upon now, if the coast curved around on itself. He felt woefully ignorant about the world he now lived in, but he could tell the peninsula was fertile, good for farmland.

Sejong turned as one of the warriors approached, bowing his head respectfully.

“My lord. The settlement of Seoul is coming along swiftly. Some of the men think we should be exploring the lands to the north, by your leave?”

“Yes,” Sejong agreed, “Tell them to head north and then follow the coast west, I want to know more about our immediate area. Have our remaining warriors set up at the neck of our peninsula.”

“As you wish,” the man answered, bowing and dashing off to spread the word.

In that moment, Sejong felt the weight of responsibility fall upon him like a heavy cloak. These people were *his* responsibility. He picked himself up and strode among them, nodding at the polite bows and smiles his people gave as he passed down into the village.

Something was wrong. His people were happy, yes, but it struck him that so much of their society was inefficient. He watched a group of

men carrying a deer back to the village between them, axes stuck into their belts. If they could develop... if they could *research* a weapon that could kill at distance, his hunters would be much more effective in their trade. Even better, he thought wryly, if we kept a large number of animals in an enclosure instead, there would be no need to hunt at all.

Ideas buzzing around his head, he strode into the centre of the village, where a number of people were telling stories around the central campfire. Many of them were elderly, but there were a few younger folks there too. Brushing the dirt from a log, Sejong sat down alongside the others and grinned.

“I may have just thought of something.”

There were a few confused glances around the campfire, but he had their attention.

“I want you to look at every aspect of our society; every tool or technique that we use. I want you to break it down, see if there is a better way, a more efficient way to do things.”

He picked up one of the axes lying on the ground nearby, waiting to be sharpened.

“Look at this,” he went on, “does the blade really need to be so large? Could we make this more effective by changing the shape or bearing of it? An advantage like that could save lives in the field.”

“Maybe if it was lighter?” A man suggested quietly.

“Lighter?” Sejong asked, turning to face him.

He was perhaps in his early thirties, with a short beard and a thoughtful expression. He seemed a little embarrassed, but seemed to have more on his mind.

“Go on,” Sejong urged gesturing for him to continue.

“If we made the axes lighter, our soldiers could move faster and react easier. It would probably tire them less when marching too, especially if we could lower the weight of their armour as well.”

Sejong clapped a hand to Jang’s shoulder, giving him a warm grin.

“That’s exactly the kind of thinking we need. What’s your name?”

“Jang, sir. Jang Yeong-sil.”

“Well, Yeong-sil, I am making you my official science advisor.”

“Science advisor!” Yeong-sil, gasped, bowing his head deeply.

“Sir, I am... I am honoured.”

Sejong took it in stride, speaking loudly so that others might hear.

“Yeong-sil, I want you to gather the smartest men and women in the village, get them working on whatever tool or technique you can think of, anything that could help our cause. It doesn’t matter if it’s a weapon or a way to carry water, so long as it improves the lives of the Korean people, and makes each year easier than the previous. You’ll have any equipment you need, just ask. We are going to do some *research!*”



Henry Morgan opened his eyes, blinking in the harsh sunlight. He cradled his head, groaning as he pulled himself upright. How much rum *had* he drunk last night?

“Can’t remember a thing,” he grunted, climbing to his feet. He brushed some sand from his long greatcoat, and glanced at the ocean. Two islands were visible in the distance, one to the east and one to the north, but they did not look familiar. Leaning on a palm for support, Henry Morgan turned inland and started walking.

Port Royal spread out before him, basking in the scorching Caribbean sun. The smell of fish permeated the air, with a few of his men laughing over a cook fire a ways down the beach. Port Royal was nothing really, just a string of low houses, fishing huts and bars. His eyes fell on his personal favourite, the *Drunken Pelican*. A sign hung over the door, featuring a rather content looking bird with a bill full of rum.

Captain Morgan was in very real danger of becoming sober, and he intended to do something about that. Pausing only for a quick adjustment to his hat, and with a little assistance from a nearby fence, he found his way into the tavern.

Raucous laughter greeted him as the door opened, but most of the patrons nodded or raised a mug as he entered. It was a modest affair; a rough-planked Caribbean pine floor and walls of daub, but it was homely enough. He hung up his hat, and sauntered up to the bar. A hook nosed man Morgan vaguely recalled as Jeremiah the quartermaster gave a polite nod as he took the next stool.

“Good afternoon captain. Nice to see you on your feet again.”

“Aye... Jeremiah, do you remember what happened last night?”

“Unfortunately not,” the quartermaster replied, resting his hands on the bar. “Actually, we were hoping you would have some recollection on that front. Nobody seems to have any idea how we washed up on this island. It’s as though we- and the island- simply appeared overnight.”

The barkeep slid a tankard of rum over to Morgan; he didn’t even need to ask at this point. Morgan gave a wordless nod, and took a drink.

“That can’t be right,” grunted the captain, “Arrgh, we probably all just drank arrselves to hell last night. Where be the ship?”

“That’s just it, captain,” Jeremiah intoned, looking grim, “There *aren’t* any ships on this island- apart from small fishing boats that is- nor are there any shipwrecks. I sent some of the crew all the way around the coast in search for answers, but we found nothing.”

*No ship?*

Morgan clenched the mug in his hands, almost to the point of breaking.

“We were marooned, then?”

“I’m not sure that’s it either, captain. I’ve talked with some of the people in the village, and they seem to think that we’ve *always* been here. They seem to look to you as a leader.”

“Leader, eh? Well, maybe we were marooned, or maybe the gods dumped us here. Either way, We’d best work out how to build us some ships!”

Downing his drink, Captain Morgan laughed and slammed the tankard down.

“RIGHT!” he roared, leaping to his feet and shaking the creases from his greatcoat. Jeremiah sat bolt upright, instantly at attention. He knew when the captain meant business.

“Gather the men. If those villagers look to me as leader, get them to help cutting down some wood for hulls and masts. It’s high time we were on the seas again!”

“Aye, but we’ll also need to build a slipway to launch it from, cribbing... It’ll take time. With all due respect cap’n, building ships does not happen overnight.”

“Then get to it!” he barked.

“Aye, sir!”

Jeremiah rounded up a few more patrons from the bar. It only took a few furtive whispers to relate the orders of the captain, and the group headed out the door a few minutes later.

Morgan turned back to his drink, his mind rolling the problem around and around. How could they have ended up here? The blasted situation made no sense. He downed most of the rum in one, and, ignoring the pleasant burning sensation on the back of his throat, marched out the door.

A quick walk around the beach gave him an excellent view of the island. Jamaica, his drunken memory informed him, really was a small affair. There was a little jungle to the west, but other than that it was like any other land in the blue waters of the Caribbean.

Those two islands on the horizon did give Morgan pause however. It was difficult to tell from this distance, but they seemed to be considerably larger than Jamaica was. It should be relatively straightforward to hold those with a few men, provided there were no aggressive locals.

There were a few little atolls out beyond the seas to the south and west, and that confused him. Surely if they *had* been marooned, they would have been abandoned out there and not on Jamaica. Better to abandon a man on a spit of sand with no fresh water, if you intended him to die. Why sail him to a comfortable fishing village?

This all led him to the uncomfortable conclusion that some mighty sea-god was playing with them. His vague memory informed him that it wouldn't be the first time. Shrugging, he took another swig of rum and headed over to one of the docks, where a few of his warriors were milling around with the fishermen and exchanging stories.

"Men!" he barked, his boots clanking on the wooden floor, "Take a couple o' these boats and explore around those two islands out there. I want to know what's going on. Whether there be shipwrecks or more villages. Port Royal is arrrs!"

"Aye, cap'n!"

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"Sejong looks to be doing well," Nebuchadnezzar intoned, peering down at the world from the *Observer*. "A research team already. Hardly unexpected."

"They're just going to be researching what, farm tools?" Em scoffed, but Nebuchadnezzar gave her a look.

“For now, yes. But they have six thousand years to work on the problem. Who knows, in a few thousand years one of them might even overtake our own scientists. It could very well happen.”

Em shuffled her feet nervously.

“What’s wrong?” Nebuchadnezzar asked, turning his chair to face her.

“You know what some of the people on the sub think of this venture, don’t you?”

“I am aware.”

There was a tense pause. After a moment, Em rested her hand upon his knee.

“Just... be careful. Okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

On the monitors behind them, sixty-one nations were founded. Sixty-one peoples, sixty-one cultures. And as the hum of the submarine rolled on into the long dark night, human civilization began to rise once again.

And the world turned.

## Chapter 1: Daybreak over Afrika

Johannesburg, 3985 BC

A wind rose above the sun-swept plains of the Highveld. It rolled along the Orange River as it pushed northeast, bringing with it the scents of the fertile prairie beyond. Weaving eddies along the calm forests, it rushed through wild sugar cane and ghost bush and wheeled down through the skin tents of Johannesburg.

It was little more than an encampment, yet one day Paul Kruger knew it would become a flourishing village like Pretoria. He paused in his study of the camp inventory, inscribed as it was into the wax tablet before him. The tablets were still somewhat clunky, but certainly a lot better than their attempts at writing using dyed animal skin a few years back. All of the stocks they had gathered over the season needed collating. His people worked hard to ensure that their reserves of salted fish and dried meat never ran dry. He ran a hand through his beard, considering the numbers for a moment.

“Long day, sir?” Pretorius asked.

Kruger didn’t look up, but nodded slightly at his economic adviser. Pretorius was good at what he did, but Kruger made a point of checking over the inventories personally.

“The report on building materials,” Pretorius explained, laying another wax tablet on the desk.

“Actually, I think I’ll get some air,” Kruger replied, pulling himself upright.

Leaving the reports on the table for the moment, he passed through the archway and drew a long breath. The wind greeted him like an old friend, unfurling the orange banner in the centre of the camp that marked this as a Boer settlement. He smiled at it for a moment. That banner stood for something, stood for what he had accomplished here. Stood for the society his people believed in.

He glanced down at the figure approaching the hill; one of his scouts was back.

“What news from the south?” he called, walking down to meet the man.

“News...” the man huffed, leaning on his knees to catch his breath. He had run all the way back from the frontier, by the looks of him.

“There are men to the south, a tribe who follow a man named Shaka. We’re not alone.”

Paul Kruger blinked. Could it be true? It had been fifteen years since he had woken that morning in Pretoria and assumed command, and almost every night he had wondered if there were other people out there. And now he knew.

“What are they like?” he asked.

“Much like us, but dark of skin. As soon as the Zulus- the locals, that is- saw me, they brought me to Shaka. He is a powerful man; and seemed as surprised as I was at finding other people out here. Their camp is a week to the south of here.”

Kruger nodded, trying to take it all in.

“What’s your name, man?”

“Kloet. Sebastiaan Kloet, sir.”

“Good work then, Sebastiaan. Make your report to the cartographers and my advisors, tell them everything you know of the route and the surrounding area. I’ll send a runner to inform this Shaka that I am coming to meet him. As soon as you are recovered, meet me at the pavilion. It’s probably best if you join the delegation.”

“Yes sir!”

The scout bowed, and headed deeper into the camp.

*It was lucky I was down south. If I had been back in Pretoria, it could have taken weeks or even months for this news to reach me. Another civilization!*

“Shaka, eh?” Pretorius mused. He appeared relaxed, but Kruger knew he would already be working out how this would affect his plans. He never missed a trick, that one.

“I should prepare for the journey,” Kruger sighed, going to sort out provisions.

“Am I not to join you, sir?” Pretorius asked, seeming concerned.

“No.” Kruger said firmly, “I need you to oversee the construction here. The workers will be breaking ground on the village hall tomorrow, and those building materials won’t organize themselves.”

“Of course,” Pretorius replied, bowing his head slightly. “I would have liked to meet these Zulu people, but you are right- my place is here.”

Kruger gave a small smile as he loaded his pack with travel rations and his water skin. Pretorius must be feigning disappointment; the man was likely dying with excitement at running the village for two



weeks. He had no qualms giving him command; he knew what he was doing.

It was almost midday by the time the group had assembled at the Pavilion. It was a tiny party really; five guards with axes, the scout Sebastiaan and Kruger himself. Sebastiaan had changed into a fresh set of clothes since his report; one of the long brown cloaks and a short staff for hiking. It was just as well; they had a lot of ground to cover.

Kruger shouldered his pack. The guards would have quite happily carried Kruger's supplies for him had he asked, but he wanted to pull his own weight.

"Ready, men?" Kruger asked, and the six nodded.

Pausing only for a few quick words with his economic adviser, Kruger led the way out of camp.

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The journey was actually somewhat enjoyable for Kruger, once they had passed the river. The orange river was thick and strong in the area outside Johannesburg, and so they trekked east at first. After a few miles of hiking through the wild sugar of the eastern plains, Sebastiaan spotted a point at which it was safe enough to ford across. Kruger wondered if it would be possible to build a bridge across it one day.

From there it was a six-day hike through narrow valleys and hills, all covered in a rippled blanket of light forest and plant life. Kruger had never been that far south, and every time he climbed a hill he was spurred on by the thoughts of what lay on the other side. His

imagination ran wild at thoughts of another civilization out there. Would this Shaka be friendly? Should he have brought a gift?

“Sebastiaan,” Kruger asked as they passed over yet another hill.

“Yes?” the boy asked.

“When we reach Ulundi, I want you to talk to the locals separately. See if you can learn anything about them. If relations turn sour, information like how many soldiers they have might be useful.”

“Of course.”

The group fell back into silence. Though he walked through lands unknown to him, Kruger’s thoughts were of home.

Finally, after skirting the foothills of a mountain range his people now called the Drakensberg, he saw the first of these Zulu people. They lived in small huts that Sebastiaan referred to as iQukwane, constructed of sticks, braided reeds and grass in a dome shape. A few of the villagers paused to stare at the foreigners, but most went back to their work. Likely word had already spread of their first contact two weeks earlier. Kruger noticed one woman holding her child on her shoulders, as if to let him see the first arrival of the strangers. He gave a small smile, but said nothing.

The huts grew more frequent until they came upon the village of Ulundi, which the Zulus regarded as their capital. Two men bearing large axes approached, blocking their way.

“Who goes there?” one bellowed, staring intimidatingly at the Boers. One of the Boer guards went to draw his weapon, but Kruger waved him down.

“We come peacefully,” Kruger explained, stepping forward with his hands splayed to show they were empty. The Zulu guards eyed them suspiciously, but a deep and imperious voice rang out from the large hut behind them.

“You may approach, *Boer*. But you must leave your men behind.”

Reluctantly, the soldiers lowered their axes and stepped aside. They watched Kruger’s companions like hawks as he alone stepped forth, approaching the largest of the iQukwane.

A reed curtain hung over the entrance way, and Kruger was forced to stoop to gain entry. And so it was that when Kruger first laid eyes upon Shaka of the Zulus, he did so from a bowing position.

“So, this is the mighty foreign leader I have heard of!” Shaka laughed, laying a hand on Kruger’s shoulder. Shaka was of middling height, but he had a muscular body. His face was ugly, with a wide nose and a prominent overbite.

“We are but farmers and craftsmen from the north.” Kruger replied formally, bringing himself upright to meet the leader’s gaze. “We come peacefully.”

“That is good,” Shaka nodded, and gestured at one of the reed chairs in the corner.

“Come, sit. We must discuss.”

Shaka himself took the throne at the back of the chamber, a slightly elevated construction of wood and reed. A great shield rested against the side of it, coated in hand-painted markings. From the look of the building Kruger had expected a dirt floor, but whatever it was made

of it was firm and almost reflective. Burning curiosity filled his stomach, as he realised how little he knew of the Zulu culture.

“Tell me of your people,” Kruger asked, sitting forward with his hands on his knees.

“The Zulus are great warriors!” Shaka announced proudly, holding himself upright. “We train our young daily in the arts of combat, in the arts of hunting. We are a strong people.”

Kruger nodded with a slight pang of uncertainty. Warriors? The Boers had very little in the way of practiced fighters. If relations with these Zulus ever came to blows, they could well be hard pressed to defend themselves. His was an agrarian people; they were not soldiers.

“I hear you have recently settled on my northern border,” Shaka growled, eyeing Kruger seriously.

“Well, I had no idea that there were any other people in the area at the time,” Kruger explained carefully.

Shaka shrugged.

“Be that as it may, you are to settle lands no closer than you already have. This is Zulu country, and it will stay that way. Settle further north or west if you must, but the coastlands are mine.”

“As you say.” Kruger replied. That in itself would be no real problem; there were ample lands in which to expand elsewhere. But he could not allow Shaka to dominate in any one matter; they must be equal in their bargaining.

“And in return, will you promise not to settle to the north?” Kruger asked, returning Shaka’s gaze just as seriously.

Shaka hesitated visibly, but he saw the wisdom of it soon enough.

“Very well,” Shaka conceded, “It will be as you say. Also, our people will be free to make the journey between our lands, for trade.”

“Agreed.”

Shaka leaned back in his chair for a moment. He appeared to go to say more, but was interrupted when a serving-woman entered with two wooden tankards.

“Ah, the drinks are here,” Shaka laughed, taking one from the servant. Kruger took the other, eyeing it suspiciously. It smelled like a thick beer; not dissimilar from what his own workers brewed in their free time.

“To peace in South Africa!” Shaka roared, raising his tankard. Kruger rather cautiously drank a mouthful of the dark liquid. The beer was foul and hellishly strong; he made sure not to drink any more of it during the remainder of the negotiations.

It was almost evening by the time Kruger excused himself from Shaka’s company. In celebration of their newfound relations with the north, the villagers of Ulundi slaughtered and roasted a large cow. It was some of the most delicious beef Kruger had ever tasted, and it made an excellent change to the salted fish they had mostly been subsisting on during the journey south. The guards exchanged a few trinkets with the locals, and were made to feel welcome.

Even with their hospitality, Kruger was concerned by the aloofness and pride of the Zulu warriors. They stood separate from the celebrating locals, and did not take part in the celebrations. They seemed powerful and numerous, and privately Kruger began to

wonder how his own defences would fair against such an assault. No, while the Zulus seemed friendly for the time being, the defences of the Boer people would need bolstering. They could not simply rely on the friendship of the south, not without the insurance of force of arms.

Eventually, Kruger called an end to the contact. He and Shaka clasped arms one last time, before the Boers retreated into the wilderness.

"I did as you said," Sebastiaan began, but was interrupted when Kruger put a finger to his lips. The group walked on in silence for almost two hours; it was only when they reached the first of the plains that Kruger spoke.

"I couldn't be sure that we weren't followed," he explained. "If I were Shaka, I would have almost certainly sent a scout to make sure that we did indeed return to our own lands. What did you learn, Sebastiaan?"

"They have over a hundred trained soldiers, but only that single village. I think we might have more people overall, but those fighters..."

Kruger nodded, patting him on the back.

"Good man. You did well."

"What did you think of them then, sir?" Sebastiaan asked.

"I think we would do best to be on our guard," Kruger replied, his face a twist of worry and determination. It was a good thing he had sent those settlers north; Shaka was not one to cross lightly.

One by one, the Boers disappeared into the forest once again.



## Chapter 2: Tasman Relations

Sydney, 3580 BC

Henry Parkes was not aging. He could not recall a time that he *had* aged in the first place. Four hundred and twenty years of rule, four hundred and twenty years of governance as the leader of Australia and not a single day had touched him. It seemed that time had given up on attempting to defeat the old man, preserving him instead as an eternal statue. The wind ruffled his long white beard, but he stood tall.

He rested one hand on the balcony, looking out over Sydney harbour. It was a beautiful city now, with some ninety thousand people calling it home. Merchants called their wares from stalls throughout the city streets, small ships brought in fine wares from the full length of the coast. From Melbourne down south to the tiny village of Brisbane up north, the land thrived. There was even talk of opening up trade with the Kimberley in the west; the government in Rubibi had been very warm in their relations with Sydney.

“Lord Parkes, sir?” a voice inquired from behind him.

He turned, inspecting the young messenger boy at the door.

“Speak lad, what is it?”

“A foreign delegation, sir. We encountered their exploration team in Tasmania, and they seem intrigued to meet us.”



“Ah, the Kimberley?” Parkes laughed, “Tell me something new, boy. The Kimberley have been wandering through this entire area, and are welcome to do so. We’ve nothing to fear from the Kimberley.”

“Not the Kimberley, sir. They claim to come from a land to the east, across the Tasman Sea. Their diplomat refers to their home as Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud.”

“Land across the Tasman?” he laughed, “I never thought I’d hear the day. And what do these strangers call themselves?”

“The Maori, sir.”

“Maori, eh? Send them in, lad.”

“Right away, sir.”

The boy bowed, and returned to the door.

*Land across the Tasman...* Parkes mused. He had spent many a long hour on a cool night, staring out at the majesty of the Tasman Sea. Letting the wind blow through his beard, eyes on the deep blue. That there was land out there, somewhere beyond the vast sea...

He straightened his clothes, turning imperiously back to the door.

There in the archway stood a man unlike any Parkes had seen before. The Maori chief was absolutely covered in tattoos. Long curved lines of dark blue ran across his forehead and cheeks, with huge swirls on his cheekbones. More intricate swirls ran down his nose, and his eyes flashed with curiosity.

“So, this is the chief of the western lands!” the Maori laughed, coming forward to clap Parkes on the shoulder. He wore a long robe-like garment, that seemed to be made of a fine animal fur.

"I am Te Rauparaha of the Maori. I'd heard the stories of men on Australia, but I only saw them with my own eyes this morning. And you rule these lands?"

Parkes nodded, glad at the friendly tone of the Maori chief.

"I am Henry Parkes of Australia. There is another leader on the far coast, but yes, I rule this side of our land," he explained quickly. "I will admit; this took me by surprise. I had assumed the Tasman stretched on east to the ends of the world, but you say you come from a land beyond it?"

"Of course!" the Maori laughed.

"Forgive me if I am rude; this is all very sudden." Parkes went on, "Where are my manners?"

He turned back to the messenger boy.

"Bring us some drinks lad, our friend has travelled a long way."

The boy bowed and retreated, leaving the two leaders alone. Parkes pulled over a couple of rough wooden chairs from the centre of the room, and offered one to Rauparaha.

From their perch on the balcony they could see out across the whole bay. Parkes had had the house built on this point for that reason, and he enjoyed the view.

"Politics aside," he began, "I want to hear all about these lands across the Tasman. How far are they? What are they like?"

Te Rauparaha smiled, resting one hand on his knee.

“Ah, where to begin? Aotearoa, or New Zealand as we sometimes call it, is a beautiful land. We have forests with huge trees, deep rivers and mountains that you can see from miles away. The land itself is so alive that you can feel it shake under your feet.”

“It does sound beautiful,” Parkes said simply, looking out across the balcony as though the lands would present themselves on the horizon.

*Ground that shakes?* He privately doubted that; it was probably just some local superstition or other, but he was hardly going to insult this strange leader. He swept one hand across Sydney, nodding.

“Australia has a beauty too; the blue mountains, the way the sun looks as it sets across the outback... but it is a dangerous beauty. There is a list of poisonous creatures that we teach all children of here; I’ll have one of my people give you a list.”

“Poisonous?” The Maori mused. “We have a small number of sharks in our waters, but other than that the most dangerous animal in New Zealand is probably a *bee*.”

“A bee?” Parkes asked incredulously. This New Zealand place really was an unusual land.

“Yes...” Rauparaha breathed, “I hope that your people are more welcoming than your fauna, Australian.”

“Of course. So long as your intentions are peaceful, the Australian people will welcome your trade with open arms. We have very good relations with the Kimberley also.”

“The Kimberley?” asked Te Rauparaha.

“Another civilization. They live on the west coast, across a vast desert. They are a reserved people, and have been exploring and charting this whole area for years. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a Kimberley scout or two in Sydney; I could arrange for you to meet with the westerners if you wish?”

“Yes, I would be intrigued to meet these Kimberley you speak of.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” called Parkes, and the door opened to admit a serving man. He bore two glasses of a pale liquid, which he presented to the leaders carefully. A plate of orange slices accompanied the drinks.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the glass. Te Rauparaha nodded in thanks, taking his.

“James, would you mind asking for any Kimberley scouts in the city? They would likely want to meet our friend. And see that the other Maori travellers are made comfortable.”

The serving man bowed, and closed the door behind him. The two leaders were silent for a time, simply enjoying the sunshine and the cool of the day. Rauparaha looked at his drink carefully at first, but he seemed to enjoy it.

“What is this drink? It tastes wonderful,” Rauparaha asked, holding it up to the light.

Parkes smiled.

“Citrus,” he explained, “We grow it down south. Mixed with a little water to thin the taste, it forms an excellent drink.”

“It does,” the Maori replied simply.

Sitting out there on the balcony, the leaders were able to relax a little. As the shadows began to lengthen they related stories of their homelands, described their own countries and in general became more acquainted with one another.

“Tell me,” Parkes asked after a time, “How long have you ruled your people?”

Te Rauparaha looked a little troubled, but he shrugged and answered.

“Over four hundred years have passed since I became Rangatira, the chief of my people. Do the winters pass you by in the same manner, chief of Australia?”

“They do,” Parkes replied simply, running a hand through his beard.

The two fell silent, deep in thought. Words could not describe the feeling of watching the children you knew from the town pass by. More and more Parkes found that he could not recall the names of the townspeople he lived among; their lives rushing past him at an ever-quicken pace as the world turned. He wondered if there were other lands out there, with other immortal leaders standing alone as the ages rolled past. That there were others the same reassured him a little, but it still did not tell him *why*.

“Jandamarra is the leader of the Kimberley people,” Parkes explained, “While I have never met him face to face, he too is said to be ageless... unless all Kimberly leaders go by the name, he is the same man.”

“I wonder how many of us there are,” Te Rauparaha sighed, sitting back in his chair.

“Indeed,” Parkes mused, taking another sip of his drink.

The Maori leader picked up one of the citrus slices, turning over between forefinger and thumb.

"I know a number of people back on New Zealand that might enjoy this fruit. Would you be willing to trade with us?"

Parkes looked across sternly.

"Before we can discuss trade agreements however, there is one thing we must agree upon. Forgive me if it was obvious- but you are to lay no claim to my island. This land is for the Australians and the Kimberley alone; am I understood?"

The Maori's eyes narrowed.

"It is agreed."

"Good. And yes, my people would welcome trade with the Maori. Do you have anything that might interest the Australians?"

Te Rauparaha paused for a moment, thinking.

"I'm not sure. I will have my people examine our stores, see what we can trade. I would be happy to pay for such fruits with coin."

Parkes nodded.

"Once you have had your people complete your inventory, feel free to send messengers. I'm sure Australian merchants would be interested in whatever exotic luxuries your land has to offer. There is nothing like trade and travel to foster peace, after all."

The door opened once again to admit James.

"Sir, I found a Kimberley traveller, who is willing to meet this foreign leader. Shall I send her in?"

“Excellent. Yes, send her in,” Parkes replied, turning to face the door.

The door swung open to admit a tall woman of bronzed skin, wearing clothes of woven fibres. A headband drew back her dark hair, keeping her eyes clear.

Rauparaha turned to the new arrival with intrigue.

“Are you of the Kimberley people?” he asked.

The woman nodded, walking over to the balcony. She spoke formally, and carefully. If she was surprised by the intricate tattoos of the Maori, she did not show it.

“Yes. I am called Jedda, and I am of the Kimberley people. I serve as a scout under Jandamarra.”

“Welcome, Jedda,” Parkes began, introducing the pair.

“This is Te Rauparaha of the Maori. He is the leader of the easterners, who live upon lands across the Tasman.”

Rauparaha smiled, taking in the new arrival.

“You are nothing like the Australians, Kimberley. Forgive me, but I assumed that you would share much of the same culture, living on the same island.”

Jedda flashed a glance at Parkes, but smiled in return.

“We could not be less alike,” she laughed, “but we get on well enough despite our differences. I look forward to meeting more of your people, Maori.”

Rauparaha nodded.

“Yes. It seems the world is a lot richer and varied than I would have once thought. I wonder how many other peoples there are, on distant lands yet unexplored by our three nations. When you return to the west, tell this Jandamarra of me, and let him know that we are a peaceful people who seek only trade and friendship.”

Jedda gave a quick grin. Parkes could have sworn he detected a momentary sigh of relief at the declaration, but he could have imagined it. *He* was relieved, he admitted to himself- the Australian people were not prepared for war. He wasn’t even sure how fighting would take place on the seas; would ships come alongside and board one another, or would they attack one another from afar somehow? You would need to build a lot of ships, he guessed.

It was a thought for another day, he decided, laughing at a joke from the Kimberley scout and taking another drink. For now, there was peace in Australia. If he truly was immortal to the waves of time, he would eventually see a day when war was fought in the Tasman. It was inevitable. But that afternoon he could forget it all for a time, and enjoy the company of friends from distant lands.

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“Do you ever wonder what it must be like?” Em asked, her voice echoing around the main deck of the *Observer*. Nebuchadnezzar looked up from his monitor bank, turning the chair a little to face her.

“Out there? It must be hard. Most of the civilizations out there haven’t developed the *wheel* yet, let alone any modern amenities. At least the land is peaceful, for now anyway.”

“Aren’t you worried?” she asked, a little concern creeping into her voice, “We’ve given them over *four hundred years*. Four centuries,



and they are still playing around in the mud technologically speaking. Some of the others are having doubts.”

Nebuchadnezzar shrugged, resting one hand against his arm-rest.

“Relax. Our civilization was just as slow to develop in the beginning. Their progress will be exponential, the same as ours. Invention begets invention. As soon as they hit the industrial era, things are really going to explode.”

“To be honest, I think half the sub is waiting for those explosions,” Em sighed.

Nebuchadnezzar put a hand on her shoulder, and the two locked eyes for a moment.

“It’ll be worth it in the end. Trust me.”

“You know I do.”

### Chapter 3: The Primum War

#### Eastern Borderlands, 3535 BC

Augustus Caesar stood tall, his back to the Alps and the hills at his feet. The landscape was lush and verdant out to the south and east; the morning casting a grey fog through the valleys. He felt as though he was standing among the clouds.

He couldn't help but allow a small smile to spread across his face as he beheld the world before him. This land was *his*.

Turning, he brushed aside the flap of the command tent- bearing his personal initials- and headed over to the desk. It was covered in loose papers and documents- troop movements, resources, finance reports... There was a folio in there on the new cotton plantation being built to the west, but he swept these aside. As the desk cleared, the papers revealed an exquisitely drawn map below. Caesar rubbed his chin absent-mindedly as he studied his surroundings.

It was well drawn, having been based on his own scout movements. The gorgeous sweeping hills from outside were clearly recognisable, the little gulfs and valleys detailed and named in meticulous print. Numerous reports had been added to this one over the last few weeks, in long tilting script detailing resource shipments and construction progress. Collectively it showed the eastern edge of his empire; the Roman Empire, in excruciating detail. He gave a small smile as he ran a finger along the delicate straight lines that denoted the roads of Cumae.

Caesar loved maps. With a good detailed map, it felt like you were flying far above the world. He could give a command and in a few weeks, see a new guard post or other feature added to his map in careful script. There was a certain satisfaction in the detail.

Tilting the paper slightly, he frowned. The Spartan border obscured much of the far side of the map, its very presence clouding features beyond. Vague shapes of hills lay beyond that line, and little else. It was as though the morning mist had crept onto the page.

“Kanut,” Caesar called, waving one of his assistants over, “Send one of the scout troops along the edge of the Alps. I want to see what Leonidas is up to over there. Do we have any free men in Cumae at the moment?”

“Perhaps the scouts that returned last morning; they would certainly be up to the task?”

“Yes, they will do nicely.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Kanut bowed deeply and departed, leaving Caesar with his thoughts.

The Spartans were a confusing people. He had tried to be friendly with them; hospitable even, but their culture was just so alien. Had it really been three hundred years since he had first met Leonidas? He could remember the evening well. Rome had been younger then; greener somehow. Banners hung free, proclaiming the majesty of Rome to the visiting diplomats.

He had expected wise men perhaps, or a group of nobles to visit and give greetings to Rome. A military leader even; he could have accepted that without too much of a raised eyebrow. But Leonidas

himself, escorted by several hundred of his personal bodyguards? Men that seemed chiselled from the rock itself; bulging muscles with legs as thick as tree trunks. It had been a deliberate show of force; he was sure of that much. Leonidas' "personal bodyguard" had been almost as large as the entire retinue of forces Rome had at her disposal, even counting his scouts in. It was a joke, a deliberate insult.

He rested back in his chair, taking a sip of wine as he mulled over the situation.

He worried about Rome's east. Parts of it were protected by mountains, yes, but just north of Cumae the mountains gave way to barren empty hills, a nightmare to scout out and even harder to govern. Worse, Sparta rested on the far side of those hills, with other civilizations like them not far beyond. With Spartan incursions growing, a line *had to be drawn*.

"Hail Caesar!" a small voice called. Caesar stifled a jump, narrowly avoiding spilling his drink. He set it down hastily.

"Speak!" he ordered, waving the soldier over. It was a messenger boy, barely old enough for useful service.

"My lord, terrible news from the east! France and Sparta have declared war on the Roman empire! Spartan forces march for our border!"

Caesar paled. *War?* It couldn't be. It must have been a mistake.

"Are you sure? How did you come across this information? Speak, boy!"

The messenger handed over a small tablet, before scampering away. Hands fumbling, Caesar brought it over to the light.

*Spartan forces at the border; a unit of warriors. I have two under my command situated in the gap east of the Alps. Even accounting for the terrain, there is the risk of a sneak attack on Cumae. Request additional reinforcements as soon as possible.*

*Hail the Immortal Caesar, and glory to the Roman empire.*

It was a few moments before Caesar could place the tablet back on the desk. He found himself reading it over and over, almost willing it to change.

He forced himself to put it down, closing his eyes and thinking things through for a moment. It wasn't a disaster. Even if he retreated from the foothills, he doubted the Spartans had the manpower to take Cumae. Even without his current forces at hand, the city would hold against the Spartans. No, this war was more about *posturing*. The French involvement was proof enough of that; their lands were much too far away to be a serious threat.

Leonidas wanted to send a message. Well, Caesar would send his own message in return. The Roman Empire was not to be trifled with.

He slammed his hand down on the desk, pulled himself upright and strode out of the tent. He stood tall once again on that hilltop, casting an eye down the valleys to the east. The terrain had not changed. It would not, even during a life as long as his- but he found himself regarding it with a new eye. That line of fog to the north and east felt more sinister, intimidating even.

"My horse!" he called, waving over his stable master. "I ride to war!"

-

"It's beginning!" Em called, waving Nebuchadnezzar over.

He rested one great hand on the controls, glancing across the screens. The submarine hummed around them.

"I suppose it was inevitable. Four hundred and sixty-five years of peace, ended over a bit of posturing in southern Europe. It almost seems a shame. Any word on the surrounding nations?"

"Nothing yet, but the key word is *yet*. It's in their nature."

Nebuchadnezzar shook his head.

"And one by one, they will all throw themselves into it. Just like last time."

-

Caesar rode forth, his banner raised high as he began his descent. His bodyguard followed close behind on foot, marching in tight rank and file. Men cheered and saluted as the emperor passed, raising a roar the followed him like a cloak.

He rode for the leading edge of the empire. Not hard; he did not want to leave his men behind- but swiftly nonetheless. Even with the pace, it took almost a full day to descend the meandering slopes, weaving through the loose hills and valleys that were common to the region. It almost made Caesar long for those beautiful nights in Rome, with the sun setting across the Mediterranean- but he had his duty, as did those around him.

And so it was that when he came to greet the Roman warriors standing upon the edge of the new battlefield- the first, of this new

world- the Spartans were amassing on the distant hills. The sun had passed its zenith now, retreating down behind them. It cast a grim, red light across the field, as if in anticipation of what was to come.

He swung his mare about, surveying the fields ahead. The Spartans cloaked the distant hilltop, their weapons glistening in the dusk.

“Soldier!” Caesar called, waving over a nearby man, “What news?”

“We retreated from our expedition east, as ordered. Two warrior units are here now, though I am concerned for the passage to the north which lies undefended. No movement from the Spartans; it’s like they are waiting for something. Just standing there, my lord.”

“How are their numbers?”

“About half our own, sire- but scouts report that they have twice as much in reserve troops hidden past the mountains to the south. There is also word of a group of English scouts out there, but that’s probably unrelated. Elizabeth has been silent thus far.”

“I see. Have the men establish watch-posts along the front; I want to know if anything changes.”

“As you say my lord.”

Dismounting, Caesar strode out into the camp. His men looked wary but firm. They were trained for this, though they had of course never seen any real action... As the day turned towards the night, the light began to fade and yet the Spartans remained steady, holding on that distant hillside without seeking shelter or warmth. They almost seemed statues to him; those muscled figures simply standing and staring.

As the light grew dim his own men started lighting a few small fires for visibility, and so Caesar joined a group of them sitting in a small circle. They all nodded their heads and offered stiff compliments, evidently uncertain how they should act.

“At ease, men. I’m simply here to enjoy the fire, and a conversation. You seem on edge, what is it?”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, my lord...” one asked, shuffling awkwardly, “Isn’t it dangerous for you to be up so close to the front? Begging your pardon, but those Spartans could attack our position at any moment.”

Caesar smiled, turning to glance at the Spartan hill. The horizon was now only visible as a faint line between two areas of darkness. The men out there were hidden, but he knew they were there.

“Dangerous? Perhaps. While it is true that I seem to be immune to the years, I would rather not test whether that ability holds against the blade. But nor can I expect men of Rome to risk their lives in my stead- to fight and die when I could improve their chances by directing men upon the battlefield.”

“If I may speak freely...” one man began, “What if you are killed? What would happen to Rome?”

Caesar gave a small sigh.

“If I am killed here, then so be it. I have ruled these lands over four hundred years; longer than any man should live. Rome will survive me- I know this to be true. Perhaps the immortality will pass with the throne?”



The group fell silent, content to simply watch the horizon for a time. The evening wind rustled through the trees- every sound magnified by the tension.

Caesar longed to attack- but to do so would be to give up the high ground. Down there in the valleys, the Spartans could charge down on them and rout his group, even with their inferior numbers. Worse, if they found a route around the attacking force, it would leave them trapped below- Spartans on both sides of the valley, and no way out. Whoever attacked first would be at a disadvantage; and Caesar was determined not to blink first.

Leonidas was out there tonight. Somewhere among the Spartan troops. He could not say how he knew; it was simply a gut instinct. He had to be out there, watching.

Despite best intentions otherwise, he could not help but check in with the various watch-posts from time to time as the night wore on. Always the same- nothing to report, punctuated with the occasional story of a loud noise that would always turn out to be a small animal or the wind. He found his temper began to fray, and he forced himself to return to his post. When the time came, his men would know what to do.

A cry punctuated the still air.

Caesar leapt to his feet and drew his sword. He remounted hurriedly, kicking his feet into the stirrups.

“Form up, Romans! Hold the line! We may lose blood, but we will not give ground!”

Just as they had practised, the warriors formed up into two rigid lines. Their strongest fighters in the fore, backed up by reserves ready to replace men should they fall. They stood ready, weapons held in stiff fingers. There was nothing at first, but a distant rumble slowly grew in volume as the enemy drew closer.

The Spartans came out of the darkness like a tumultuous tide. They scaled the hillside with impossible speed, their legs propelling them towards the Roman line. Caesar called out, and the two sides met with a crash. Spartan axe bit Roman sword as they wrestled back and forth, harrying and retreating only to smash again into the Roman line.

Caesar wheeled his horse around, charging along the front, sword raised.

“Push them back!” he roared, diving into the fray. He slashed wildly, driving a Spartan to the ground. As one, the Romans stepped forwards, their feet marching in the mechanical precision of their empire. The Spartans fell back- slowly at first, but growing in number as they were forced down onto the slopes.

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When dawn broke again, Caesar stared in dismay at the unbroken Spartan line. They had retreated back to their hill, yes, but their numbers seemed hardly diminished. This would not be resolved in one battle, it seemed.

*We can't give ground. If we show weakness, France or even Germany could take advantage. We can't afford a two or three-front war.*

As Caesar patrolled back through the camp, he saw wearied faces among those men he had only recently come to know- faces once youthful now scarred, eyes once bright and lively now downcast.

He considered delivering a speech. They had served him well in the past- stirring men into activity, raising spirits. But he did not deliver one that day. He turned away, returning to his command tent to read through the latest production logs from the south.

These men didn't need speeches. They needed *reinforcements*.

Dipping his pen in the ink bottle, he began to write.

## Chapter 4: Across the Ridge

West of Tegea, 3490 BC

Leonidas knelt down, getting a closer look at the injured soldier. The Spartan warrior had taken a thick gash across his chest; but it was not life-threatening. He unfastened the water skin at his belt, handing it down.

“Here man, drink this.”

“Leonidas... Bless you, sir.”

The man took a few quick gulps before stoppering it and handing it back.

“What did the medic say, Nedius?”

“I’ll live,” the soldier sighed, “It looks like I’ll have to get that glorious death in battle another time.”

Leonidas laughed, clapping him on the shoulder as he pulled himself upright. The medicine tent was filled with similar cases. Spartan men fought well against the Romans- and they never left a man behind. Nodding in respect to another man he knew among the injured, he pushed through the tent flap and out into the crisp air.

He paused for a moment, resting a hand on the hilt of his sword, gazing out across the horizon. On a cool night, when the wind wasn’t too bad, the view from Tegea camp was beautiful. Looking west across the river, the twin mountain ranges framed a clear sky. They beckoned to Leonidas on nights like these, a gateway through which

to step. Cumae lay just out of sight; hidden by the ridge that marked the end of Spartan control and the beginning of the battlefield.

One day. One day Sparta *would* stretch its legs from the Adriatic Sea to the Black. He would see it done. That tyrant Augustus Caesar would be forced back, pushed to the coast and defeated.

“Leonidas?”

Shaken from his musing, the Spartan king turned and nodded as Hyrtios approached. He was a mountain of a man; clad in bronze breastplate and holding himself as only a true Spartan could.

“It’s good to see you again, Hyrtios. What news from the west?”

“Same as ever. The Roman line weakens, but it holds for now.”

Leonidas rubbed his jaw, thinking over the situation. Forty-five years of fighting back and forth over the same damn ridge. Sure they had Roman blood to show for it, but no ground had been gained- and likely none would, unless the French got their act together and attacked the northern pass like they were supposed to be. It was that same problem the whole time- fighting across a valley, having to give up the high ground to attack and putting your own men at disadvantage. The French insisted they were preparing for a major push to aid Sparta in her assault, but nothing had materialised yet.

“We will kick them back eventually. What do you think will happen when we capture Augustus? Do you think an immortal can die by the sword?”

“I... I’m not sure.” Hyrtios mumbled, evidently uncomfortable.

*That would be an intriguing fight. I suppose we would have to lock him in a dungeon eventually. What if his wounds regenerated or something? There would be no honour in defeating him over and over. I guess we will burn that bridge when we get to it.*

Leonidas had had his fair share of wounds in battle of course, but never anything life threatening. Nor had he heard of any of the other leaders actually dying in combat... It was worth thinking about.

Hyrtios coughed.

“Anyway,” he continued, “There’s some news from the east. A distant leader has arrived with a small band of men; have you ever heard from the Huns? A group of them are on the edge of camp; they came seeking you.”

“Only in bar stories. Do you think these men are actually the Huns? Not just some Spartan lads with big heads?”

Hyrtios laughed.

“I doubt it. Not unless these Spartan lads have worked out how to make a type of fabric I’ve never seen before, design outlandish weapons and equip fifty men with them. Their leader calls himself Attila; he’s asking to meet with you.”

“Attila eh? Fine, send him to the command pavilion.”

Hyrtios nodded, departing.

Leonidas glanced back towards the mountains, thinking furiously of the stories of the Huns. There wasn’t much to go on; most of it devolved into weird stories of hairy men who carried away children in the night. Old wives’ tales; likely devoid of any original truth. Still, if

they did exist... they would have to be out beyond the lands on the far side of the Black Sea. The world, it seemed, grew with every passing year.

He shook his head as he strode through the war camp. Men were wrapping bandages around minor wounds- fresh from last night's hostilities, no doubt- and others practised the blade or exercised. A true Spartan dedicated themselves to the craft of war completely and perfectly.

There were some new additions to the camp, however. The personal guard of this Attila, he assumed- men in furs and metal helmets, with warhorses and sour dispositions. They looked ready to leap into action at any moment.

The command pavilion was simple enough in design; a large brown tent with a red arrowhead emblazoned upon the canvas flap. Leonidas brushed it aside, stepping through.

Attila was shorter than he had expected, but broad of shoulders and strong.

"Ah, so this is the famous Leonidas!" the man laughed, clapping him roughly on the shoulder.

He spoke loudly and aggressively, standing bolt upright as if to seem taller than he was. A grin cut through his ragged beard as he approached.

"Welcome, Attila." Leonidas nodded, gesturing towards a table and chairs.

Attila threw himself down into one, laughing and reaching for his drink.

"I have heard much of your strength in battle, mighty Spartan! Have you not also heard of the powers of the Huns?"

Leonidas sat with a little more dignity.

"Actually, I believed you to be a fanciful story until this morning."

Attila laughed, but his eyes flashed with a silent anger. It was only there for a moment- the look swiftly covered up by a joyful smile, but Leonidas saw it. He had seen that look before, in men who were willing to fight to the death over an insult to their honour. It was the look of a man who killed often and in large quantities. Oh, he had seen that look before.

"Where do your people live?" Leonidas asked.

"We live in the great plains to the far east," Attila explained, sweeping his hands off to one side, "beyond the Black Sea."

"Ah. I'm afraid distance warps information. It's not unsurprising that we've never met properly; your lands could well be two months' ride from here, depending on weather and the terrain."

"Not on a *Hunnic* horse," Attila snorted, "You must visit the plains one day. With a swift horse, it would still take you months to cross them- and at night, when the sun sets beyond the steppe and the frosts touch the air; it's an incredible place. Not that Sparta does not have its own beauty of course."

Leonidas nodded silently, eyes on this Hun. He still wasn't entirely sure what to make of the man. He was dangerous certainly, but Leonidas had befriended many a military leader in the past with likely equally gruesome histories.



Attila took a quick swig of his drink, running a hand through his beard.

“How old are you, Spartan?”

Leonidas blinked, taken aback. When was the last time someone had even asked that question?

“I don’t know. I’ve ruled for five hundred and ten years, but before that...”

“Then you are like me. An immortal soldier, doomed to kill but never to die.”

Attila laughed bitterly, and then there was silence.

*How many men have I sent to their deaths, while myself unable to die? No, that’s crazy talk. They fight to ensure Sparta’s future in the next age. But this man... I can see that he enjoys the prospect of eternal warfare.*

It was all Leonidas could do not to allow his hand to drift to his sword hilt. This man... this *creature* was nothing like a Spartan, despite his assurances to the contrary. A Spartan fought to protect their lands, fought for their country. Any enjoyment in war was indirect; it came from the Spartan principles of honour and glory. But this man... this was a man who conquered and killed for *pleasure*.

Attila laughed raucously, shattering the silence with an icy hammer. He wheezed, eyes watering with mirth as he slammed his hands down on the table.

“Ah, but I am here for a reason of course, Spartan. Tell me, have you heard of the lands known as *Russia*?”

Leonidas nodded, returning to the task at hand.

“Russia. Now that I *have* heard of. I sent out scouts once to determine the lands beyond the Byzantine- and they returned with word of a civilization past the Black Sea, in lands as cold as the slopes of the mountains.”

“That’s them. And we Huns in turn lie beyond even that- but we have had an *argument* with our Russian neighbours.”

He thumped the table, startling a passing serving-man.

“They have settled our sacred plains! They cut down the great forests, threaten our rivers and grazing grounds- and every year they push us further. We are going to fight back; free the plains from this horde!”

Leonidas could see where this was going, but he entertained the man for now.

“And what business is this of mine?”

“*Join us*, Leonidas. You too are feared on the battlefield; with Spartan soldiers alongside the Huns, Russia shall be crushed from both sides.”

Attila leapt to his feet, shaking a fist for emphasis.

“And when our men have finished looting their cities we shall *burn* them to the ground! The glory shall be ours! *Burn* them! We shall *crush* their people into the dust!”

Leonidas grimaced, easing to a more alert position in his chair slowly.

*This man is mad. Quite clearly.*

He glanced at some of Attila's bodyguards. Their eyes seemed downcast, looking away from their leader.

*Oh, what it must be to have an immortal war-monger as king. Or whatever these people choose to call him. Warlord perhaps.*

In hindsight, he supposed that Attila's actions were not that different from his own. He *had* attacked Rome in a pincer movement with help from France- though Napoleon had yet to actually *do* anything of use in the forty-five-year campaign- and he had done so in order to gain control of their lands and resources. Still, Leonidas had no plans to *raze* conquered cities. Those were people's homes, their livelihood. Take that away and he would condemn hundreds, thousands to death from hunger or exposure.

Still, the idea did have its merits. Forty-five years of campaign had drained Sparta somewhat- a fresh alliance could improve morale, lift spirits. There was a slowly growing sentiment that war as a concept was a failure- after all they had yet to take ground in their feud with Rome. But with Russia...

*They're too far away to actually be of any threat. We could just declare war, and send the odd shipment of supplies or something. A war in name, to fit an alliance in name.*

It would be empty; shallow even. But Europe was destined to fall into large-scale war. He knew that now, just looking at the tensions building on the continent. Germany seemed to be moving to war with the north, and that was just one of the incidents he was aware of. It could only be a matter of months before German troops attacked Sweden or Rome.

Could a short term alliance with these barbarians- and an empty war with Russia- keep his people moving forwards? If it helped his people prepare for the storm that would come, he could do it.

“Alright, Attila. Sparta will declare war on Russia, along with you. You will have Spartan spears by your side, my friend.”

The words felt dry on his tongue, but he spoke them anyway.

“YES!” Attila roared, grasping Leonidas’ forearm with more force than was strictly necessary. Pulling back, he raised his tankard high.

“A drink, my friend. For the war to come!”

Leonidas adjusted the muscles of his face, falsifying a grin. But inside, his guts twisted.

*What have I done?*

## Chapter 5: On Black Shores

Nassau, 3355 BC

“You call that a *ship*?” barked Henry Morgan.

He jabbed a finger at the prototype trireme. It floated in the bay far below them, listing to one side where it seemed to be taking on water. It looked tiny from atop the cliff where they stood. The shipwright flushed, wringing his hands.

“Ah... it’s just a test, captain.”

“A test? I’ve given you men over *six hundred years* to build a ship!”

He rounded on the shipwright, the wind fluttering through his greatcoat as he loomed over the man.

“I ah, can’t speak for my predecessors, but we *have* built the smaller boats; the ones for ferrying the men to and from the...”

“Those things are pathetic; I’m talking about *ships*, man! Ships that can hold a hundred souls, ships with weapons for ramming other vessels, blockading enemy cities! Damn it man, any half-decent shipwright would have built me enough ships to form a bridge back to Jamaica in that time!”

The shipwright trembled before the captain, casting worried looks back at the trireme prototype in the bay. The men aboard it seemed to have given up bailing the water that rapidly filled the vessel. As he watched in horror, they began to abandon ship, swimming back towards the beach.

"It's the caulking, captain, I'm telling you. No matter how closely we bind the planks together; they keep giving way to the water. We've tried pitch, but it just keeps..."

"Find a way," growled the captain, stalking away from the cliff edge.

*Bloody shipwrights. They can get us to the mainland, but can't build anything larger than a bathtub?*

He shook his head as he began to descend the hill, Nassau spread out below him. Morgan had seen the ornate streets of the Mayans, but he much preferred the Buccaneer style. Nassau clung to the mud as though it was afraid someone would take it away. The village was a seething hive of bars and taverns, just the way it should be. None of that ridiculous frippery the Mayans had up-shore.

Ships or no ships, Nassau rested upon a marvel of engineering. His men had cut a canal at his insistence- connecting one ocean to the other. The Nassau canal, it was called- a gateway from the Caribbean to the Pacific.

Morgan ground his knuckles, staring out at that blue line that wove through his city. He had visions of great sailing ships passing through that canal, with treasures and liquors from distant lands. Visions of a mighty armada stretching from continent to continent like a great sea serpent, biting chunks out of the world wherever the black flag saw fit. And he would make those visions true, if he could- but after centuries of failed experiments like that wreck in the harbour they still lacked ships of any real merit.

He opened one side of his greatcoat, pulling out a bottle of dark liquor. He drank it as he walked, cursing occasionally.

He had lost count of how many coats he had worn through over the years. The greatcoats were made by a tailor family in Port Royal, handing down their talents through the generations. Each coat was sturdy enough to last a normal man his lifetime- but not long enough for Henry Morgan.

Reaching the foot of the hill, he strode through Nassau, throwing his thoughts aside as he wove into the raucous laughter of the evening. The many bars of the city hung open tonight, wide thresholds leading onto warm hearths and warmer drinks. He nodded a man he knew, and ducked into *The Boatman's Daughter*.

A wave of sound and the stench of alcohol greeted Morgan like an old friend as he crossed the threshold. Dozens of people danced erratically, bumping into one another and laughing over the music. One man danced a fine jig atop a table, others jeering and drinking with mirth.

Morgan grinned, sidling over to the bar and raising a hand. The barkeep, as always, passed a tankard of rum to him without request nor charge.

"Quiet night?" Morgan asked, stifling a smile as he glanced back at the packed tavern.

"Oh, I wouldn't say so cap'n. I heard those men were launching that ship today, any luck this time around? They've been building it since I had *hair*!"

"No, but we'll get it right one of these days."

"Aye, sir."

Morgan turned around, resting against the bar. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves; the dancers exchanging partners and laughing against the rhythm. Everyone, except a man in the far corner.

His head hung low over his drink, eyes downcast. His features were obscured by a long dark cloak, hood pulled up so as to conceal his face. He did not seem to fit with his surroundings, as though he had been dropped into the room from another unexpectedly.

Morgan paused for a moment. It was difficult to say, but he didn't recognise the man. There had been a time when he could have named every man under the black flag, and while that time had passed he still could pick out those who did not belong- and this man did not.

He rested his drink on the bar, and walked over. He sidled through a dancing couple who were getting *far* too into it all, and came up behind the stranger.

"Ho there. I haven't seen you round these parts before. Your name?"

The stranger turned slightly, but said nothing.

Morgan frowned, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"Didn't you hear me lad? Speak when the Captain asks you a question!"

The man spun, ducking out of Morgan's grasp. Flinging one side of his robe aside, he reached for a sword at his hip.



Acting on instinct, Morgan grabbed the man's wrist; and the two locked eyes. The hood had slipped back slightly, revealing ornate earrings and necklaces of worked metal.

*A Mayan?*

Hissing in anger, the Mayan shoulder-barged the captain, forcing him to stagger backwards.

Morgan stumbled into a drunkard, who spun with a grin and punched a bald merchant with a crooked nose. With only the slightest of giggles, the merchant flipped the table and hurled a chair out of his way- clocking the local baker in the side of the head as he did so.

In seconds, the tavern erupted into a bar-fight- though it was one of the good-natured drunken kind Nassau was famous for. Sure, the man with the crooked nose started throwing heavy kegs from behind the counter into the crowd; but he didn't really plan on actually hitting anyone; it was more a general expression of drunken revelry than actual bloodlust.

The stranger stood stiffly upright in the middle of it all, drawing his sword slowly. He bore a wicked blade of rough iron, curved slightly at the tip. Eyes flashing, he raised it at the captain.

"A *Spy!*" Morgan roared, jumping up. He kicked the legs of the Mayan out from underneath him, toppling the man. The sword leapt out of his hand, skittering across the floor.

The Mayan tried to regain his footing, only to be pinned by a half-dozen Buccaneer men from the bar. He yelled and tried to break free, but they pressed down on him and bound his wrists behind his back.

"Pirate dogs!" he hissed, flailing as a couple of men dragged him upright.

Morgan stood upright slowly, adjusting his greatcoat. The Mayans were becoming more daring, it seemed.

"Take him to the brig." Morgan grunted.

--

The prisoner slumped against the walls of his cell, arms chained to pegs on the wall. He was muscular; that much was evident now that his robe had been replaced with a simple prison outfit. His long hair was now visible, hanging across his face. The room was a cube of stone walls; the night air flowing through a thin grille and giving a bitter chill to the air. Morgan kept his distance, sitting against the opposite wall of the cell.

"Who are you?" he barked.

The man snapped his head up, glaring at the captain. He said nothing.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me." Morgan added after a moment, an irritated edge creeping into his voice. "I said- who are you?"

The man shrugged, looking away.

"Not talking to me would be a very bad idea, son. Our boys have all kinds of fun ways of making a prisoner talk, and none of them are that... pleasant. I'll ask you one more time. Who are you?"

"My name is Ikal," the man growled, eyes firmly on the floor.

"That's better." Morgan smirked, "Seems you do have a tongue after all."

He paused for a moment, inspecting his fingernails. He let the silence continue until it became awkward before continuing.

“What are you doing in my lands? I trust you are aware of *border laws*.”

“I was sent to watch the prototype trireme tests. Seems that didn’t go as well as you’d hoped, *captain*.”

“You watch your tongue, boy!” Morgan grunted, biting back further insult.

Pacal was wary of his trireme tests, eh? According to the latest scouting reports, Pacal had been training troops- but he also lacked any ships currently. It had become obvious quickly- whoever gained proper ships would likely be able to wrest control of the entire Caribbean, if not the mainland too. He could see why Pacal was on edge.

“And what was your plan then? Sabotage our ships? Steal the plans?”

The prisoner said nothing.

“It’d be a bad idea not to answer my questions, *boy*.”

“Alright!” Ikal grunted, “I was meant to steal the plans for the ship.”

*I figured as much*, Morgan thought to himself.

He stood slowly, maintaining eye contact with Ikal.

“So, you crossed our borders illegally. You intended to steal our information, and outright attacked me without provocation? You’d better get used to jail cells, *boy*.”

Morgan left the brig, slamming the door behind him.

Stealing the plans for the trireme prototype? That was daring, even for Pacal. It proved he was worried, worried for what the Buccaneers were capable of.

There would need to be a response- The Buccaneers could not let such an insult go unpunished. But for now, all Morgan wanted was a drink and some fine company. Shrugging, he headed off into the centre of Nassau. *The Boatman's Daughter* was still being cleared up, so he chose another.

He drank heartily with some old friends, speaking of old stories- but even with the night rolling along undisturbed, he could not shake the feeling that out across the bay, beyond the border, King Pacal was watching.

## Chapter 6: The Prophecy

Ciudad Juarez, 3295 BC

A wind rose in the hills of Mexico, drawing a hot breath across the land. The clouds rolled lazily across the sky, sluggish in the evening sun.

Sam Houston dismounted, stretching his legs as he walked across the dusty street. He grunted, relaxing muscles that had grown tense from hours in the saddle. His hand rested at his hip for a moment, as if reassured by the presence of his sword, and then continued up to adjust his hat. It was made from browned leather, with a hand-painted Star of Texas at the front. Some called it the Lone Star, and he liked the name.

A second rider pulled in alongside him, and he gave the man a friendly nod.

“Well if it isn’t ol’ Sitting Bull. You round these parts for these here festivities too?”

Bull laughed, flipping out of the saddle. He looked to be in his fifties, physically at least- but Houston had known him for getting on seven hundred years. With the lives of men charging on past- there one moment, gone the next- Houston treasured friends like Sitting Bull.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Is Morgan with you?”

Captain Morgan was an unusual one. Houston had only met the grizzled captain rarely, but he had heard much of his reputation in the form of late-night bar stories.

“No, I haven’t seen him. He’s usually with Pacal- or just late.”

“I see.”

Houston glanced up at the building before them; a palace built of rough wood, circled by a palisade wall. Had it been extended since last time? This was to be the seventh festival, marking seven hundred years since all this had started- by Mexican reckoning anyway. Houston missed the open fields that had hosted the first few; cooking meat on open spits while fireflies danced around them.

Bull turned, patting his brown mare reassuringly. It gave a small whinny and took a couple of steps.

“She senses my unease.” Sitting Bull explained, “I will admit, I am a little uncertain about how this festival will go. I’ve never attended an event with so many of us in one place.”

“Relax,” Houston replied, “The festival is just a show really, it’s more of an excuse to meet the other leaders and go out for drinks. Why, two centuries ago Juarez and Morgan got so drunk they started dancing on the roof of the inn!”

“That does sound entertaining,” laughed Bull. He nodded at the building. “Should we go in, or wait?”

“Let’s head on in. Pacal might be there already.”

Bull grunted, straightening and making for the carved wooden door. It opened smoothly into a large plaza filled with dozens of festival goers. They milled about and chatted over drinks, many wearing elaborate costumes. A good number were dressed as skeletons, with flamboyant dresses and suits with bright colours atop painted bones.

It was as though the living and dead had double-booked the venue and had simply decided to dance alongside one another.

"I never did understand the whole Mexican pantheon thing," Houston muttered, while delivering a smile at a lady who passed him by.

"Excuse me, miss. Do you know where a feller might find Mister Juarez?"

"Oh, Mister Houston!" The lady gasped, delivering a curtsy hurriedly.

"The very same," Houston replied smoothly.

"You should head over to the palace, I saw him up on the balcony a few minutes ago."

She gestured up at a first floor gantry up ahead, in the main body of the palace. It overlooked the courtyard, and was festooned with strips of coloured fabric.

"Thanks, darling."

Houston nodded to Bull, and they began to weave through the dense crowd. It was difficult to make much headway as dancers spun past, skirts flying and laughter echoing across the plaza. It was impossible to avoid overhearing conversations as they pushed through.

"Have you heard about the ice spirits?" someone said, "I hear they've been sweeping through the north, freezing the land with their very steps!"

"Rubbish," someone laughed back, "Children's stories. Why, I heard not five minutes ago that a group of them were seen in western Mexico. Ice spirits, this far south?"

"Maybe they were lost!" a woman shouted back, giggling.

It took about five minutes to reach the archways that led into the main body of the palace. Houston grunted, straightening his hat when he finally broke free of the dancers.

"Never thought I'd say this, but, you know, I miss the old Ciudad Juarez. When it was just a dozen buildings and a whole lot of empty hills and forests."

They made their way down the corridor, heading for the stairs.

"Times change, old friend." Bull replied, resting a hand on an elaborately carved wooden eagle before making his way up.

Eventually, they found their way to the parlour, with its simple balcony that looked down over the festival. A few members of Mexican society milled around, the sound of polite chatter filling the air. Benito Juarez himself stood out there on the balcony, resting casually against the railing.

"Ah, welcome, old friends!" he laughed, gesturing the two over.

"It's been too long," Bull grinned, clapping arms with him.

Juarez wore clothes of a smooth cut in the Mexican style, his face clean shaven and hair swept over to one side. He smiled, nodding at Houston respectfully.

"Ah, my friend from across the Rio Grande!" Juarez laughed, shaking his hand.

"Indeed." Sam replied, trying not to grimace. Word from his scouts informed him that the Mexicans had recently settled land *north* of the River. Juarez was overstepping himself- but tonight was not the



time for that. Tonight they would meet as friends, like those old nights on the prairie, before politics and the threat of war and all the rest of it.

“Sitting Bull, have you met Pacal before?” Juarez asked. He stood upright, shouting over the assembled guests.

“Pacal! Our friends from the north have arrived!”

Lord Pacal of the Mayans emerged from the collected noblemen, a dozen necklaces of polished beads adorning his bare chest. He wore bracers and rings of metal embossed with intricate symbols.

“We have not yet met, I think,” Pacal said, shaking Sitting Bull’s hand, “Welcome to Mexico, northerner.”

Houston glanced around the room, scanning it for a familiar face.

“Where’s Morgan, that old sea dog?” Houston asked. “I haven’t seen him in decades!”

“He’s not coming,” Pacal sighed, “Morgan and I had... a disagreement. It was nothing major, just a misunderstanding a while back, but he’s not going to make it to the festival.”

“That’s a shame, I was looking forward to some more of his bar-room antics. Send him my regards, if you see him.”

Pacal shrugged.

“Sure, fine.”

“Friends,” Juarez interjected- “The festival is beginning!”

Putting their differences aside for the night, the four leaders took their seats on the balcony, passed round a few drinks, and simply watched the events unfold below.

Drummers took up a beat, hammering the night into rhythmic chunks as dancers stepped forth into the plaza. They wore brightly coloured dresses, tassels of fabric flowing behind them as they stepped and sang to the beat. They moved in an undulating line, curling and laughing as they circled the courtyard.

“Juarez, your people have outdone themselves!” laughed Sitting Bull.

“Only the best, for old friends from distant lands,” grinned Juarez, raising a glass.

“To peace in the Americas!”

“Peace in the Americas,” the others agreed, taking a swig of the local drink.

The dancers twirled below, changing direction and doubling back on themselves. It was actually quite impressive; their skill and coordination was evident.

“Speaking of the Americas,” Houston began, “I got word recently of a scout from the east. He claimed to hail from a land beyond the Atlantic, called “Ireland”.

“Ireland?” Pacal asked, “Never heard of it. He’s probably just some lad with grand ideas, nothing to worry about.”

After the dance concluded, the music dropped to a low hum, vocalists taking the floor and intoning a long, low chant. Multiple tones

cascaded over each other in a long wave, sometimes jubilant, sometimes mournful.

An old man took the centre ground, his back hunched and his face hooded. He walked with the aid of a walking stick, clicking on the stone paving as he walked. When he reached the centre, he threw back his cowl, revealing long greying hair and a firm expression.

“Tonight,” he called out, “We honour and remember those who have passed on, that they may be remembered by those who remain. We...”

He trailed off, as if uncertain. The crowd murmured, confused- and then gasped.

Suddenly, a golden light enveloped the man. He threw his cane aside, holding his arms open as if to embrace the light as it hit him.

“I can see it all!” he roared, staring into the sky.

“I see the men of the frost! They blight the land, spreading from the north. I see fields turned white, our cities dying! I see the cold touch of winter crushing life from the land. I see a light standing against them, a man who will live thrice. I see him battling the winter... if this resistance is futile, I know not, but for the duration of his lives he stands against the cold death. The messiah walks the earth, and he is close! The man who will live thrice holds back the winter, and without him all is lost.”

“And the Messiah is among us tonight!”

The light blazed brighter, so strong that Houston had to look away- and when it faded, the man was gone.

The crowd sat silently for a moment, but the silence did not last long. Shouts broke out as people called out questions. They leapt out of their chairs and ran across the plaza, as if to see some evidence of his passing- but he had vanished. Only his cane remained, a rough hunk of wood lying forgotten in the centre of the plaza.

“Who was that man?” Houston asked.

“A wise man by the name of Cathol. I think we just witnessed... a prophecy?” Juarez replied slowly.

“What are those men of the frost he spoke of?” Pacal mumbled, “The ice spirits of the north?”

“Those are just legends,” Bull replied, waving his hand dismissively. “The Inuit aren’t nearly as dangerous as the myths would have you believe.”

“But that prophecy...” Juarez said uncertainly, eyes back on the plaza. A few people had seized the forgotten cane, and rose it over their heads as if in reverence.

“Whether he spoke true words or not, I think it struck the heart of these people.” Pacal muttered, standing. “I’m leaving. Until next time, Juarez.”

The Mexican leader nodded, but said nothing. The wind blew slowly, stirring the leaves as the balcony began to empty.

## Chapter 7- The Tasmanian Affair

Melbourne, 3160 BC

Henry Parkes sipped his drink, humming to himself as he looked out over Melbourne. It had really grown over the last few years, spreading from the river up to the hills of gold in the south-east. At some point in the last few hundred years, Parkes realised that he had begun to view cities like children. From grandfatherly Sydney in the east, down to the tiny village of Perth in the west. The lives of men came and went like the morning sun, burning fast and rolling on across the land like the waves of time- but cities grew and matured on a time scale he could understand.

Parkes liked quiet nights such as this. When the general hubbub of commerce died down, and he could relax with a drink on the balcony, and a starry sky above.

The tankard he held was of Maori craftsmanship, cut from smooth tōtara wood and bound in rings of iron. It was a gift from the people of Parihaka, from a visit several years ago. Their smiths had really brought the craft along; this tankard had some quite delicate spirals down the handle. He sipped his mulled wine, stretching back in his chair. From here he could see the entire bay; the waves of the strait rolling in like calm breaths.

A sudden movement in the darkness caught his attention. A messenger bird alighted on the balcony railing, pausing to have a drink from the bowl he had set out. It then hopped up into a small loft built into the siding of the building.

Parkes stood, inspecting the tiny bird for a moment. The various governors across Australia had numerous messenger systems like this; they were usually reserved for emergencies.

Frowning, he headed over to the loft and delicately removed the tiny piece of paper from its leg. He unfurled it, bringing it over to the candlelight.

*Maori settlers have constructed the beginnings of a village on Tasmania. Potential violation of the Sydney agreement?*

He crushed the paper angrily, tossing it into the fireplace. The Maori, on Tasmania? Could they really be that bold?

“James!” he roared.

The door opened cautiously, admitting an elderly manservant.

“Yes, sir?”

“Ready a ship. I’m heading to Tasmania to find out what the hell is going on.”

The manservant blinked, but he knew better than to disagree.

“At once, sir.”

--

“Do you think he will declare war on them?” Em asked, pointing at the monitor.

Though she stood aboard the submarine, far below the southern ocean, she could see out across Australia easily through the miracle of satellite and drone technology. A half dozen screens showed the

Maori settlement on that remote island, nestled among the forests and hills.

"I doubt it; the Maori and Australians have been relatively friendly up to this point. I'm more interested in Tasmania's potential as a staging ground for Maori assaults in the coming centuries."

"You do like to take the long view," Em mused, flicking a grin at him.

"Still, it could be interesting." Nebuchadnezzar went on, "With the situation in Europe, Australia has seemed almost tame by comparison lately. Though, I am content with peaceful cooperation of course. Would that all the continents were as peaceful as this one."

Em rubbed her chin, musing over the scene before her.

"I still can't stop thinking about that prophet in Ciudad Juarez. Do you think it could be connected to the *event*?"

"For the tenth time, he was probably just some madman with a taste in dramatic exits. That 'sacred' light was likely just some primitive chemistry to awe the crowd. We still don't have enough information from Mexico to speculate."

"You think it was all a trick?"

"Of course," Nebuchadnezzar replied. "I see no reason to suddenly start believing in spirits and all the rest of it. You know, their legends of the Inuit are *wildly* inaccurate. I'd be more concerned with what Attila is evidently planning."

"You can be so dry sometimes," Em laughed, "Here we are, watching the greatest game in history, and you're just analysing them like lab rats! Try and enjoy it, for once."

Nebuchadnezzar laughed.

“Ah, but analysing them like lab rats is *how* I enjoy this, my dear.”

—

It took almost a week for Henry Parkes to reach Tasmania. The wind was favourable, but the ship itself took a full day to prepare. There were supplies to gather, oarsmen to muster... It was only a small ship, a couple of men to each oar, but these things took time to arrange. Parkes was half-tempted to simply seize command of one that was already ready, but he stopped himself short of that.

*My people need those for fishing; it's their livelihood.*

He was the first off the boat when it pulled up on the Tasmanian coast that crisp morning. It was a narrow bay, framed by forests with hills beyond. A mountain stood ahead, a lone sentry above the horizon. It seemed to look down on him, as if disapproving of his presence.

He waded up to the shore through the shallows; his short, quick strides cutting through the water. The other men shivered at the cold, but he found mornings like that *bracing*. They only served to strengthen the resolve of a man like him. His anger at the *insult* the Maori had inflicted had only grown, magnified by sitting in a dark hull as the waves crashed around him.

*How dare they...*

He turned as a soldier reached the beach, hand at the hilt of his sword as though Maori warriors were going to jump out of the bushes.



"You there," Parkes called, "Climb that hill to the east. I want to know if we are close."

"Yes, sir," the soldier barked, striding off into the trees. Some of the other men went to move provision sacks ashore, but he cut them off with a gesture.

"No, leave them in the ship. I do not intend to be here long."

Henry Parkes turned back inland, surveying the Tasmanian coast. He had only been here once before, some four hundred years ago- but he had seen enough maps to know that this should be *Australian* land, not Maori. He scooped up a handful of sand, letting it trickle away through his fingers. If Te Rauparaha was establishing a presence on the island, he wanted it stamped out, and fast.

It only took a few minutes for the scout to return.

"There is a small column of smoke a couple of miles to the south; I think it's a village."

Parkes grunted, grinding his knuckles into a fist with more force than was strictly necessary. Even though he knew it was unlikely, he had hoped against hope that it was a misunderstanding. That Te Rauparaha- the man he saw as a close friend, perhaps almost as close as Jandamarra- would go behind his back like this was just inexcusable.

"Lead the way."

Swinging their shields onto their backs, the men obeyed.

—

The Maori settlement was a small affair. It was little more than a modest collection of houses, looking down from the slopes of the mountain across the great oceans that lay beyond. Parkes bristled at the site of a troop of Maori warriors on the island- *his* island! They milled around the village, laughing and talking with the settlers- but it was clear from the axes at their belts what their purpose here was.

One noticed Parkes approaching, and bowed deeply.

“My lord Henry Parkes! It is an honour to meet you. Welcome to Whanganui-a-tara; the jewel of the south. Te Rauparaha himself is in the village today; if you wish I could have a messenger send for him?”

“At once,” snapped Parkes.

The Maori soldier bowed deeply, and spoke quickly with one of his men. After a moment, the man sprinted off towards the settlement. Parkes kept his tongue still for now; the illegal settlement was not the fault of these men. No, his dispute lay with Te Rauparaha.

“Begging your pardon, my lord,” one of Parkes’ men began, “Isn’t it a bit unusual, Te Rauparaha being here personally? This is just a small village.”

Parkes nodded, his face grim.

“It tells us something, certainly. This is not some sort of bureaucratic accident; it means Te Rauparaha is overseeing this *personally*.”

He turned, shaking his head. Though he disapproved of the location, he had to admit the Maori village was actually quite beautiful. A large Wharenuī stood before them, a meeting house with elaborate red sculpture work adorning the front. The doors stood open invitingly,

with a few Maori children chasing one another among the pillars. Te Rauparaha emerged from within, striding over to the Australians.

“Henry Parkes! I did not expect a visit from one such as you!”

The Maori smiled, gesturing at the village.

“You are of course welcome to our home, what brings you here?”

“You know damn well, *Maori*,” Parkes hissed, “You violated the terms of the Sydney agreement. I told you to keep on your side of the Tasman sea! I turn my back, and you decide to lay claim to Tasmania. How *dare* you.”

Te Rauparaha scowled, stepping up to the Australian.

“That is *not* what the Sydney agreement says, old friend. I agreed not to lay claim to *Australia*. This is an island off the coast of your mainland, like Aotearoa and the many smaller islands my people call home.”

“Don’t play words with me,” Parkes scoffed, “This land is quite clearly Australian. Why, we are practically within sight of Melbourne!”

“If there has been a misunderstanding, I apologise,” Te Rauparaha conceded, stepping forwards, “But the fact of the matter is that the Sydney agreement does not ban Maori settlement on Tasmania. We scouted out the entire island when we arrived, and found no Australian presence here.”

“Yes,” Parkes grunted, “But the spirit of the document was quite clear.”

He sighed, turning to glance back at the settlement. The villagers looked confused, eyeing the arguing leaders warily.

Parkes wanted the island for his people. But Te Rauparaha was evidently not going to give it up, at least not peacefully. In truth, Parkes was not prepared to force these people off it, not if it came to violence. It would mean declaring war on the Maori, and that was no small undertaking. Even if he had wanted to, he doubted the Australian military had the capability to perform such a large operation overseas. No matter what way you looked at it, Tasmania was now Maori, and it was going to stay that way for a very long time.

“Well,” he sighed at last, “I am not one to try and force people from their homes. You may stay, Maori. I will have the Sydney agreement amended to specifically state that the Australian *mainland* is beyond the remit of your people. But I warn you, Maori, If you push Australia any further she will push back. I will not tolerate underhanded dealings, nor bandying of words.”

“Understood, old friend,” he replied, evidently relieved, “Why don’t you come over to the Wharanui? I was just preparing a drink, using some of the local citrus.”

“I’d like that,” Parkes acquiesced, following him to the meeting house. The two had known one another for hundreds of years, and it was impossible to stay angry at the old leader for long. Still, even as they exchanged old stories and drank away the day, he couldn’t help but feel a little bitter about it all. Tasmania really should have been Australian soil.

Pushing such thoughts from his mind, he shook his head and returned to the conversation.

## Chapter 8- Flames on the North Slope

Neapolis, 3085 BC

A frozen breath of wind wove across the land, gusting among the snow-capped peaks of the Alps. The air rolled, churning down the valleys that lay between the mountains, twisting and descending until it chilled the men who stood guard at the perimeter of Neapolis. They stamped their feet and ground knuckles, banishing the chill from numb fingers and toes. One of the men cursed.

Augustus Caesar strode along the line in short, quick strides. These men had once saluted and stood fiercely upright when faced with the enemy- but now they stood hunched in the cold. The Alps had been a mighty ally in their defence against Sparta, but here in the high passes to the west the chill bit harshly into their ranks.

Neapolis was a small settlement- more of a military outpost than a town- but he wanted to see it protected nonetheless. It was the northern gateway of the Roman empire- the wall that stood between his civilization and the hordes beyond. He gazed out at the lines of French troops on the horizon, marching slowly forwards.

“Any news from the garrison at Cumae?” Augustus asked, nodding at one of his men.

“Cumae holds firm; the Spartan border seems quiet for now- but our requests for reinforcements have gone unanswered.”

*Unanswered? Damn it, are the men being intercepted in the mountains?*

Picked off by French warriors no doubt, creeping through the southern pass. He dared not say it aloud, but it was clear those around him knew it too- without those reinforcements, Neapolis was doomed.

“Send out a scout. I want to know what happened to those reinforcements. They may need our aid.”

There was no way the garrison at Cumae would have denied the request- but if the men didn’t make it, there was little he could do. He was loathe to spare even a single man from the perimeter of Neapolis to go looking for them, but it was their only shot.

In truth, he was regretting building this encampment in the first place; it would have been better to build it back on the far side of the mountains, to use the terrain to their advantage and wait till the French were exhausted and cold before attacking.

“Hold fast, men,” Augustus growled, as if the men had a choice. At this point a *retreat* would be dicey at best, and he knew it. Even if he could escape, it would put the rest of the empire at serious risk.

He turned back to stare out across the forests and hills. The foliage made it difficult to see, but it was clear that the enemy occupied almost 180 degrees of the horizon- French forces to the north, Germans to the east. The latter were like vultures, circling down on Neapolis and seeing the desperate defence as an easy opportunity. It made him sick.

His own men had withdrawn to the city; they stood behind him now in long lines, their bows strung and quivers filled. They didn’t even have time to construct *walls*; the perimeter of the town was merely defended by several lines of fallen trees, and the determination of

the men at their posts. He had the temporary barrier constructed overnight, sending men out to the fringes of the forest with axes. It had seemed a strong idea on the time, but now with them on the ground it all seemed so fragile.

War-horns roared from the north, shaking the men.

“Steady! We must hold until reinforcements arrive!” Augustus bellowed, sweeping his arm to the side as if to physically hold the men at their posts. The horns called again, echoing around the mountains and returning distorted.

“String your bows!” Caesar called, shouting back up to the archers mounted on the rooftops.

The French came first, waves of warriors with wicked axes in blue uniforms. They rushed in an endless tide, sprinting free of the forests. They roared, hefting weapons as they approached the barrier.

*Damn it, they're closing too fast! The archers aren't ready yet!*

A thin buzz raked across the trees beyond the French line, and a cloud of arrows flew towards Neapolis.

“Shields!” yelled Augustus, pulling his own into view. Cries of pain answered his call, the man next to him taking an arrow in the neck and crumpling instantly.

“Archers! Let these cowards know the might of the Roman empire!” Caesar roared, sprinting for his horse. He mounted up in seconds, wheeling the mare around and charging along the line. The archers behind raised their bows, drawing fletching to cheek as they sighted their targets.

“Fire!”

The musical twang of bowstrings reverberated through the city as it launched its own deadly shadow across the sky, followed by howls of anger from the French- but on they came, leaping over their fallen comrades as they charged closer and closer.

“Hold the line!”

The Romans at the wall of fallen trees drew their swords, hacking at the French as they began the approach. Some of the attackers became impaled on sharp stakes, but many wove closer to the wall and began to exchange blows with the Romans.

Augustus stared grimly as the perimeter turned red with blood, French and Roman mixing on the icy ground. He held back from fighting himself, though he longed to leap into the fray. The two sides hacked at each other from either side of the treeline, leaning out with their weapons to slice at the enemy.

Another wave of arrows loosed, greeted by one from the French. Caesar gasped as a knot of men in front of him collapsed. Though much of the perimeter remained strong, only three or four Romans still stood on the fifty foot section ahead.

“They’re focussing fire here!” he cried, “Rally to the north wall!”

A cluster of men approached him from behind, he turned to see a number of ragged archers with grievous wounds.

“Sir!” a man cried, “Word from the scouts to the south. The reinforcements from Cumae were ambushed in the mountain pass, only these survived.”



And with that revelation, Augustus knew he had lost. As he turned back to the battlefield, he saw the line breach. The French had banded together at the north wall, forcing two of the trees inwards like great doors. Beyond them, Cheers of delight erupted from the German lines, as red-clad forces began marching for the city.

He had to make a decision.

“Sir?”

“Retreat!” Augustus cried, kicking the horse into action as he raced towards his men.

“Retreat! Make for the mountain pass, and the empire!”

The exhausted Romans broke away from the perimeter, the French leaping after them. German forces poured in through the breach, cheering and hacking at the ragged soldiers as they fled. Many were chased down before they had moved a hundred yards from their post.

“Retreat!” Augustus called again, as if willing fallen men to rise and continue marching, to follow him back to safety.

“My lord, French forces are passing around the city to block the pass, we must leave immediately!”

Brushing tears from his eyes, Augustus spun his horse around. He turned his back on the defences of Cumae, racing for the southern gate.

“Make for the pass!” he called, shouting at all who could still hear. He galloped into the heart of the village, passing shops and homes once filled with life, now ablaze as looters smashed windows.

*We must ready a fresh defence on the far side of the Alps, his methodical mind desperately proposed, perhaps with new forces from Rome we could...*

His mind trailed off, unable to provide fresh strategies and information. The men he had lost, the people he had seen killed... It was all too much. The horror of the situation became overwhelming, sweeping logic aside.

He raced through the southern gate, the defences long abandoned. He lost himself in the rhythmic thud of the galloping horse, concentrating on keeping upright and moving forwards.

He did not look back, not until he was almost a half-mile from the city. Great flames flickered from behind him, casting dancing shadows upon the rocky earth as he stared back at the once-proud Neapolis. The shells of broken buildings formed a jagged skyline, pointing accusingly at the sky.

"How did it come to *this...*" he murmured, gazing back at the lost city. The French didn't seem to be pursuing, but Neapolis was firmly under their control.

A group of thirty or so men were a little further up the hill; he rode over to them.

"My lord! I feared you lost in the attack!" one of the men exclaimed, dashing over.

"Are there any other survivors from this side?" Augustus asked.

"None, sir. We were flanked by German warriors as we left the south gate; it was chaos. We were able to overcome them, but at a heavy loss. My lord, the city..."

Augustus bit his lip, keeping his head firmly upright. He sat straight in the saddle, holding the reins tightly.

“Is everyone capable of marching?” he asked.

“Aye sir. Marcus has a nasty cut to the shoulder, but we bandaged it best we could. We’re ready for orders.”

“We make for the south. Neapolis has fallen to the French, there is nothing more we can do for the city. The soldiers out there won’t take their time; they could well be marching through this valley by nightfall. We have to warn the empire; I did not lead Rome for nine hundred years to see it fall tonight!”

The men nodded, picking up what equipment they had. They followed Caesar south, up into the valley and the relative safety it provided. Even so, the wind blew up from below as if pursuing them, bringing with it the smoke from the city. It rolled around them in black clouds, making their eyes water.

At least, that was what they told each other.

## Chapter 9: Blood and Horses

## Outside Leningrad, 2965 BC

Attila sniffed the air, eyes wild as his heart beat in anticipation of the battle to come. He steadied his horse, grinning at the field before him. Leningrad lay ahead- a small town of wary people. To the west, it was protected by the river, a thick black line on the cold horizon, but to the east the city was all but undefended. It stood without walls, nought but a paltry garrison to defend it. It would be easy taking.

“Any word from Leonidas?” he asked, nodding at the messenger as he approached.

“Four cartloads of supplies my lord- travel provisions, arrows and smithing supplies.”

Attila scoffed. So the mighty Leonidas sent only *supplies* to war? What was he going to do, provision the Russians to death? The Huns had more than enough food, what with the raiding as they passed through Russian land. It seemed that the might of the Spartans was nought but a legend.

No matter, it left more quarry for the Huns. He stared out at that town, imagining the kills that would come. He could see a few people out there now. They appeared mere specks at this distance, but even so he could see them running from building to building, smell the fear that radiated from that town.

“This is going to be... *enjoyable*.” he whispered.

A few of the soldiers cast sidelong looks at him, but none questioned it. None dared. They remembered others who had questioned Attila and his glorious violence. These men knew to follow orders, and kill when commanded.

He felt the blood lust rising, a burning passion within his gut to rend, tear and destroy. He held it at bay in polite conversation; masked his face with calm smiles and expressions that were expected of sane individuals. Had to blend in, hide the desire to bite and tear at the flesh that stood before him. But not today; today he could do whatever he damn well pleased. He gripped his leather-wrapped sword hilt with white knuckles, enjoying the thrill of the oncoming hunt.

"I think a good number of them have fled the city, my lord," a man announced nervously.

"No matter," he laughed, "Those who remain will be sport enough for today."

He patted the warhorse's neck, looking down at its dark mane. He had bred horses for over a thousand years, the strongest and proudest of descendants giving sire to the new generations. The blood grew thicker with each passing century, and he could feel it now, the pulse of the great beast against his hand. It would serve him well in the battle that was to come.

"Mount!" he roared, straightening in the saddle, "Tonight we hunt *Russian!*"

The men cheered, leaping onto their own horses. Bows were strung in seconds even from horseback, the soldiers running through the practised motions of the art of war. Attila drew his wicked sword from

its sheath, a huge scimitar he had forged himself many years ago for this very day.

“Forward!” he screamed, kicking the army into movement. It charged forwards across the plains, a rolling thunder of men and horses and death. Yells and curses radiated out from the city, and he smelled the fear of children hot on the air. He lost himself in the rhythm as the horde rode across the plain.

The other leaders wasted away their long years. They sat in pretty palaces, drinking wine and whiling away the hours. They dabbled in politics and intrigue, and waged wars from behind fortresses and desks. But not Attila.

*It's time to show them what a thousand years of combat does do to a man,* he mused.

A thin, almost half hearted volley of arrows burst from Leningrad, diving towards the horsemen. Attila glared at the oncoming mass, and adjusted his grip on his sword.

*There.*

Leaning back in the saddle, he swiped the blade upwards, cutting the arrow out of the air in a practised gesture. The fragments spun harmlessly away, lost in the dust as the horse powered ahead.

He grinned, urging more speed from the horse as they charged.

A ragged line of men with spears were forming up ahead, holding their weapons poorly. Attila felt a small amount of respect for how they stood against such a superior force, but it only added to the rolling mantle of hatred he wore.

He raised one hand, and the army divided cleanly in two, wrapping around the back of the spearmen in seconds. They gasped, trying to swing their weapons around, but they had bunched together too tightly and couldn't manoeuvre in time. The horsemen ploughed into the flank, shattering their ranks in an instant.

Leaning almost out of the saddle, Attila swung his mighty sword and cleaved straight through a spear and the man holding it.

Another quick gesture and the cavalry changed formation, trampling the last few spearmen and funnelling into Leningrad's wide streets in an unstoppable stampede. Horse-archers sighted targets at will and fired, picking out targets from windows and rooftops as they stormed through. Lone defenders fell from upper gantries, clutching at arrows embedded in their chests.

"This is almost too easy!" Attila roared as they charged through the city square. The bloodlust within him built higher, unsatisfied by the paltry defences. He scanned the city for targets, considering a few fleeing men and ignoring them out of hand. There were a few swordsmen up ahead, a close huddle of twenty men who had probably never seen combat. It would have to do.

He sighted a man among them, a young Russian in ill-fitting armour. The lad had probably fetched his grandfather's equipment from the attic; he barely knew which way to hold that rusted sword of his.

Attila licked his lips, adjusting his posture in the saddle and slipping his feet out of the stirrups. As he approached, he lifted one foot up atop the horse's neck. He waited breathlessly as the man drew closer and closer.

“DIE!” he screamed, jumping free of the animal. He crashed down atop the soldier, his sword sinking straight through the gap behind the collarbone and into the man’s heart. He rolled, yanking his sword free and swinging it up in a wide, bloody arc. Russian men cried out, bunching forwards as if to jab at him with their weapons, but Attila batted them aside with a grin.

A thousand years of training made for some truly laughable fighting—it was like overpowering sickly children. He hacked and cut, sliced and screamed as metal bit and rent the flesh before him. He giggled in maddened glee as he kicked his blade free of a broken helm, whipping it round to behead another man behind him.

When a group of them tried to bunch together to fight him, he merely had to kick one in the chest to knock all four of them to the ground. He descended upon them then, like some horrifying bird of prey, blade flashing as it hacked. In seconds, all had been reduced to a pile of mangled corpses, their blood spreading across the paved earth.

At last, the deed was done. He flicked the sword off to one side, shaking blood clear before returning it to his sheath. Kicking one of the downed men with a grin, he leapt atop his horse with ease and spun the beast around.

Heading back to the central square, he found his own men standing guard over about thirty prisoners. They knelt before him, hands over the backs of their heads. Glancing down at them, he could see that any thought of resistance had vanished from the residents of Leningrad.

“These the last?” he called out.



"All the men of fighting age," a soldier replied, "though we're still searching some of the houses. Seems a good number of the townsfolk had already fled."

Attila nodded, walking along the line. He walked up to the man who had answered, a grim-faced officer with a scar down one cheek.

"Do we normally keep prisoners?" he asked quietly.

"Prisoners? No sir."

The man looked confused, shifting uncomfortably.

"Then why have you gathered these together, without my command?"

"Well, they surrendered you see, so I thought we would wait for..."

"Surrendered?" Attila hissed. He spun back to the prisoners, one of whom had begun to weep.

"I fought men of your kin out there on the plains," Attila shouted, his face imperious, "They faced their deaths with honour, though they lacked experience and equipment. And you, their flesh and blood, kneel here in fear?"

He paused for a moment, allowing the words to echo around the square. He raised his sword slowly, letting the light cast along its oily surface.

"Is there a man among you who will face me in combat, and die with honour?" he asked.

There was a pause.

"Is there not *one*?" he growled, eyes flashing.

Silence greeted his words, the men continuing to kneel with no change in their posture.

“So be it,” he uttered, sheathing the blade. He turned to a group of several soldiers, and gestured at the prisoners.

“Slaughter them.”

## Chapter 10: By Tales Old and Cities Fallen

Kumasi, 2890 BC

“Welcome to the west, Mister Kruger,” boomed Osei Tutu, his voice low and rich. It was a warm morning, the African sun peering across the plains. Kruger nodded at the greeting, crossing the threshold of the palace and clapping arms with the Ashanti King.

“It’s good to see you again, Osei.” Kruger laughed, “It seems with the troubles of the north, I’ve scant had time for anything else. How are things on the front line?”

“The war goes badly.” Osei sighed, gesturing as he and Kruger passed through the main hall. Dozens of noblemen had gathered, and Kruger gave a small nod at those he recognised- many with considerably more grey in their hair than they had during his previous visit.

“I wish our lands were closer, that you might be able to assist in the war effort directly.” Osei muttered.

“We’ve talked about this,” Kruger went on, “My people are farmers, not soldiers. I can continue to provide supplies, but not warriors.”

“Would that we could all be so peaceful,” Osei nodded, suppressing a scowl.

“Still- you are a guest, and my troubles should not be your troubles. Come, let us share a drink like old times.”

The two dined, and spoke of trivial matters. They left the topics of war and hardship for a later time, almost pretending that they resided once more on the simple, bountiful world that had existed a

thousand years before. For a time at least, the two could share a simple drink.

After a few hours, when the sky outside began to grow dark, Osei Tutu called for the great braziers to be lit. They gathered around an old wooden stage, as musicians gave accompaniment to the evening. A bard emerged from among them, a man with brown hair and wore a robe of loose fitting cloth, carrying with him only his antenteben, a flute-like instrument.

“I bring you a tale from years past.” began the bard, pausing to play a few notes on his antenteben. He was a young man, but his eyes shone with a wisdom beyond his age. Others took their seats, eyes on the stage.

“Far to the north, there was once a proud city by the name of Llaningard, at the heart of the land of Rus. Its people were happy, and food was plentiful within its shining walls. It stood as a bastion of peace and prosperity, a shining beacon to which the other cities of the north aspired.”

He played a few more notes, allowing the melody to wash off the walls of the inn, forming a pleasing wave that echoed around the room as he continued.

“But not all, for there was a man by the name of Adler who looked upon Llaningard with anger in his heart. He gazed at those enormous walls and beautiful libraries, and it made him feel small. He hated its wealth and its power, its prosperity and its knowledge. He sought to tear it down, brick by brick, until the great plains of the north were barren once again.”

The melody became discordant and quiet, the smooth echo disappearing as if into the wind.

“He travelled into the wilds, far beyond lands sane men called home. As he roamed, he roused an army from those wastes, recruiting barbarians more beast than men. He organised and trained these brutes through years of harsh fighting, forming what simply became known as the horde. These creatures rode upon horseback, and were so numerous as to blacken the land with their presence.”

The bard paused, allowing the words to sink in. The bar was quiet, all present listening to his tale with eager hearts.

“When the people of Llaningard saw the horde on the horizon, they called for aid. Now, the land of Rus had a wise king, but he feared the horde. When the call came he flew into a panic, locking himself away in a distant city and turning to drink.

And so it was that Llaningard stood alone against the hordes of Adler, and for three days and three nights the guards of the city fought back against the beast-men. But alas, the horde was too numerous. On the fourth day, they broke through the walls and poured into the city proper, sacking the once mighty palaces and burning the beautiful libraries of Llaningard.”

The melody became wistful and sad, as if it carried with it a great weight. It pressed down on the room, silencing all but the story.

“Adler did not raise his flag however- he sought to eradicate even the memory of the city, and the taunt it provided. He slaughtered them to a man, beginning with those of fighting spirit and working down to even the smallest of children. Not even the babes were spared. With his bloody work done, the horde looted the wonders of that place,

and set fire to it. The flames climbed the towers and walls of Llaningard like a monster from the deep, burning away the knowledge and beauty of the city. Even so, with all their scheming it took thirty years for Llaningard to burn, for the towers were so vast and majestic. It is said that during those years, night became day for the people of Rus, with the fires of Llaningard a second sun on the horizon, the pillars of light reminding them all of what had been lost."

He blew one final note, letting its mournful sound ring out across the room.

"Weep for Llaningard. Weep for the city that is no more."

"For the city that is no more," murmured the crowd, raising mugs and drinking to honour the people lost.

Osei Tutu placed his mug on the table thoughtfully. It had been one hell of a story, certainly. He could almost see the beautiful city of Llaningard, hear her great towers collapsing.

"I heard a similar tale in Pretoria last year," Kruger began, "Down south we call him Atill, but it was much the same story."

"Do you think it is true?" Osei asked, "that all that actually happened?" The Ashanti king turned to look at the Boer, a critical look on his face.

"True?" Kruger replied, "I doubt it. It sounds a little far-fetched, don't you think?" Kruger leaning back a little in his chair, taking another sip of his drink. He paused for a moment.

"Though I will admit," he added, "Your bard is among the best I have heard in the last five hundred years. When I visited the Ethiopians last

spring, their bard was *pitiful*. I know military captains who would be teary-eyed at a tale as powerful as the one we just heard.”

“Do not doubt the people of Llaningard, noble leaders,” the bard interjected. He was just collecting his things, but he paused to look the Boer in the eyes.

“Names change as the years do, but the message holds true. Their lives were as real as mine once; they should not be forgotten.”

He nodded at Osei, before giving a final bow and leaving the stage. The band that replaced him took a few moments to organise themselves, so a light chatter began to emerge.

“I can’t help but wonder,” Osei asked, steepling his fingers, “how the people of Rus responded to such a provocation. If the city took thirty years to burn, there can’t have been much in the way of attempts to salvage it or expel the invaders.”

Kruger shrugged.

“No, there’s nothing like that in the version I heard either. The king fled west, hid in a bottle and left Llaningard to its fate. I suppose he was afraid of Atill- *Atler*, in your version- and thought that the best way to avoid further bloodshed was simply to let him have what he wanted.”

“He won then, Atler. By striking such a mighty blow, it left his enemies fearful of him. I wonder...”

Kruger scowled, planting his hands on the table and looking Osei in the eye.

"I see where you are going with this. I know that the... *disputes* with Carthage have been going poor recently, but this is not the way out. If you tried to emulate Atler..."

"You don't think I could handle it?" Osei growled, standing up.

"That's not what I was saying. We aren't in the northern wastes here- we are in Afrika. A stunt like that would only draw another challenger, and another, until the Atlantic turns red with the blood of your people. Let's say you managed to beat back Carthage- who would attack next? Morocco? Mali? The Kongo? We are surrounded by powerful players in this great game, players who would take advantage of an overstretched neighbour. I'm telling you as a friend- it would be your destruction."

"You have no faith in the strength of your friends, it seems," Osei hissed, stalking out of the bar.

Returning to his quarters, Osei locked the door and threw some kindling on the fire. He lit it delicately, watching the flames drink in the fuel as it awoke.

*I could do it.*

Walking over to the desk, he scattered a stack of useless documents with a wave of his hand. He didn't need any of it now; reports of Kumasi's cotton production could wait. Underneath it all, a detailed map of Afrika had been carved, showing the lands of the Ashanti in beautiful detail.

The Boers were off to the south-east in the heart of the continent, an endless ripple of farmland and villages. How easy it must be for them, settling vast untamed plains peacefully to their hearts' content.



He ran his hands over the northern edge of his lands, where the fertile lands of the Sahel turned to endless desert. Here the borders were scarred; carved and re-carved many times on top of each other till the map appeared wounded. The battle lines. How long had they been fighting?

He ran his hand down, through the Ashanti heartland and onto the Atlantic coast. There was a freshly carved mark on that coast- the Carthaginian settlement of Hippo Regius. It was a long way away from the rest of Carthage, in lands he had earmarked for his own people. It would be difficult for them to defend...

The fire behind him crackled, a shower of sparks bursting out as a log collapsed.

There was already a garrison of Ashanti troops nearby. They would be capable of overrunning Hippo Regius, if he gave the order.

He ran a hand across his chin, contemplating it. Could he really do it? Could he annihilate an entire city with flames, kill so many in the process? Atler had been more beast than man, but if becoming a beast would save the Ashanti people, he was prepared to do it.

He threw another log on the fire, and began to write.

## Chapter 11- Across the Rio Grande

Ciudad Juarez, 2860 BC

Benito Juarez sat on the balcony, staring at the empty plaza with a bottle in his hand. The simple stone-pavings of old had been replaced by ornate swirls of mosaic and metalwork inlay. A band of gold circled the courtyard, reciting the words of prophecy for all to read. Great statues depicting the holy Cathol stood at the entrance now, holding aloft his staff with eyes to the heavens.

What had it been, four hundred years? Could it really have been so long since the ascension? Where people had once come to drink and tell stories, pilgrims now came to pray and meditate. The world continued to turn, time rolling forwards in an unending tide that eroded the old world- and so too Juarez' own palace was transformed.

The Mexican king shook his head. And to think, he could recall memories where he had doubted the holy message. There had been a time- it must be a hundred years ago now- when he had wanted to stop Mexican schools from having children recite the words every morning. When he had laughed at the superstitions his people felt towards winter. No longer. He saw the truth between the lines, the meaning that lay at the heart of all life.

*I see fields turned white...* he mused, thinking over the words from the sacred verse. There were those among his people who interpreted that as the spread of Texas; the lone star raising the pale flag upon more and more land as they sprawled across the northern

plains. He found himself siding with them in time, his mind blurring the past until he could have sworn he had never doubted it at all.

And to think, he had thought it referred to the Inuit. As though some far-off nomads would ever be a realistic threat! They had to be what, three thousand miles away? Obviously, the verse was not meant to be taken *literally*- the real threat here was Texas, he saw that now. That pale flag mocking him as it claimed the fertile plains- turning *the fields white*, as the prophecy put it.

He took another drink from the bottle, swirling around what dark liquor remained. He had drunk enough bottles of Buccaneer rum to kill most men, and yet he still walked the earth, untouched by any lasting damage or penalty. He laughed at the ridiculousness of it all.

*I see a light standing against them, a man who will live thrice.*

Could it really be him? He had lived a dozen lives at this point by Mexican reckoning, whiling away the long millennia untouched by age. Perhaps it simply meant a man who lived a very long time, as many believed. Or perhaps it meant a man who led three lives- as a religious leader, a political leader, and a military man. The term 'thrice' could even refer to the first part of the sentence- that he would stand against the pale flag three times, and yet live.

Why were the leaders immortal in the first place? Could they really have been granted purpose in their time upon the world, keeping them locked in time as so many believed?

*And the Messiah is among us tonight!*

He could have sworn that the holy Cathol had looked at him as he spoke those final words. He remembered it clear as if he were still

there, the prophet turning and glancing at the balcony just as the light smote him. The words rolled over and over in his head, a rhythmic chant that had come to dominate his thoughts.

*A man who will live thrice... A man who will live thrice...*

There was a knock at the door. One of his advisors entered cautiously, giving a respectful bow before speaking.

"Sir; word from the north. Lincoln has declared war on Texas, as you predicted."

"Is that so?" Juarez mused, picking up his sabre from the desk. He held it up, watching light play across the metal. Lincoln had little in the way of forces, but his attacks would have Texas marshalling its armies in the east, away from the Mexican border. Their backs would be turned.

*I will do what must be done.*

"It's time to take back our wayward province." he growled, grabbing his cloak. He did not sheathe his sabre as he stood, raising it high above his head as he called to those below.

"All who hear my voice! Know now that I proclaim myself the man who will live thrice, the man who will wage war against the pale flag! Mexico marches for war!"

There was a moment of stunned silence from the people below, punctuated by a sudden cheer as they realised what he was saying. The crowd roared, and he raised his sabre yet higher.

"Stand against the cold death!" the crowd chanted, "Death to Texas!"

Juarez bustled back through the doorway, sprinting for the stairs. He dashed down them two at a time, heading for the stables at the back of the palace.

“My horse!” he called, “ready my horse!”

—

By nightfall, he and five hundred spears marched for the Texan border. It was a long, harrowing passage; circling the valleys of the sprawling Sierra Madre that rippled across the land. They formed great peaks on the horizon in every direction Juarez could see, after dark becoming black shapes cut out of the night sky. They stopped for shelter under one such bluff, overlooking the distant valleys of territory they had yet to cover.

The air was crisp out there, cooler than the fetid plains behind them. There was something inexorably fresh about being out in the mountains, cleansing even. But Juarez thought of nothing but the holy verse and his quest, his eyes firmly on the east. Even the cool mountain air did nothing for him but to stir another section of the verse.

*I see him battling the winter.*

He pulled the cloak tighter, taking deep breaths. He would conquer these lands, he vowed, see Mexican people farm these great valleys, in a time free from the oppression of the east. Texas would be thrown down, and a rightful ruler would be instated.

It was almost a week by the time they came to the river, the Rio Grande barely ankle deep. He could remember a time when the river had been thick and fast in this area, but time had eroded a wide

floodplain now that was almost a half-mile wide and very shallow. A low mist clung to the ground, chilling exposed flesh.

And there on the other side lay the Texan defences. A low barrow wall had been raised, upon which stood a troop of Texan archers, bows held at the ready.

*So, they saw us coming. It makes sense, Houston never did trust me fully.*

“Turn back!” a voice called from the Texan side, “This doesn’t have to end in bloodshed!”

Juarez ignored them, guiding his horse into the water. Seeing his men hesitate he turned, raising his sword.

“On the other side of this river,” he announced, “lies Texan lands. The pale flag hangs like a noose from every tower, choking the lands below. We will liberate Texas from the tyrannical rule of Sam Houston- it is our destiny!”

“The man who lives thrice!” cheered the soldiers, wading forwards.

A grin on his face, Juarez charged forwards, his horse splashing the Rio Grande into a fine white mist that trailed behind him. He roared with his men as they rolled forwards behind him, five hundred spears pointed at exactly the same angle as they stormed through the waters.

There was a moment’s hesitation, but he saw the Texan officer give the signal up ahead.

“Fire!”

The Texan arrows launched far above, a cloud of needles that descended down upon the river. The Mexicans screamed, white froth turning red as their charge became a stagger, and then a retreat.

“NO!” shouted Juarez, “Do not turn your back on destiny! Charge them, the prophecy is with us!”

A second volley launched and the soldiers fled before it, turning their backs on the lone horsemen who stood at the fore. No longer a holy man, a sacred leader- now merely another soldier, screaming above the tide.

“Death to Texas!” he called in desperation, raising his sword as if commanding his dead to do the same.

The second volley reached the force, and more men fell- their bodies thrashing as arrows forced them down into the water. More than half of the spear-men were down, the rest already dragging themselves onto their own shore.

And in that moment, Juarez saw where his actions had brought him. He saw the reality of their futile assault- the harsh reality of a war against an entrenched foe. Blinking away the tears, he turned his back on the Texan border, and fled.

*It is not the end. I will return twice more. And in time, Texas will fall. I swear it.*

Juarez galloped back to his own shore, weaving among the dying, and disappeared into the mist.

## Chapter 12- The Westminster Conference

London, 2740 BC

A warm wind rose in the deep blue waters of the North Atlantic. It wheeled east, weaving towards Europe, with its verdant farms and spreading cities. It stretched to the north a little, skirting along the edge of the channel and the myriad of small villages that dotted the coast, before blustering northwards into the maze-like streets of London.

“Blasted Englishmen,” Leonidas muttered, climbing the stairs of the great palace at the heart of that city. His guards followed closely behind, Spartan warriors skilled in the spear, the sword and the arts of weaponless combat. Men he would trust his life to- and did, on a daily basis.

He turned back beyond them, glancing down at the elderly serving-man who seemed to be having trouble with the stairs.

“Please sir, if you just wait a moment I will be able to guide you to...”

“I know the way, serving-man,” Leonidas growled, carrying on without him. It had been a century since his last visit to the palace, but he remember the layout well enough. Decorations had changed, true- styles in the courts of western Europe seemed to change as fast as the seasons- but the building was much the same as it had been those long years before. He hardly needed some foolish serving man a twentieth of his age to direct him up a simple staircase.

He climbed upwards, heading for the audience chambers. The Spartan king did not knock at the oak door- once his guards were



assembled outside he simply walked in and pulled up a chair at the table.

“Oh. Welcome to England, Mister Leonidas.”

The room was a display of English frippery at its finest- ridiculous ornamental tapestries and paintings that served no real function other than to display the wealth of the queen. Elizabeth herself occupied the far end of the table, wrapped in an elaborate dress of white. Leonidas idly wondered how much more plentiful the lives of the English would be if their leaders didn't insist on hoarding wealth like this. A Spartan King lived as his people did- he dined with them, fought alongside them. How could a leader understand their people, if they lived in a shining tower of wealth? They would be mere ants viewed from the window then, not individuals with their own personalities.

To the right of Elizabeth sat a bald man with a craggy face and thick-framed glasses. He wore robes of white and blue, bearing the crest of his nation.

“Urho Kekkonen of Finland, isn't it?” Leonidas asked, gesturing at the third leader. “I don't believe we've met.”

Kekkonen nodded respectfully, but responded only with a calculating stare. He turned to Elizabeth, as if watching for a response.

“You are late, Spartan,” the queen intoned, giving Leonidas a long glare, “I trust you remember why I invited you to this meeting, if not the start time?”

“If that's the way you treat your guests, I might well side with Germany,” growled Leonidas. “You summon me for aid in your war, to

talk over strategy- and then insult me when I step into the room? To be frank, I can't see why we really need to be here at all. I respect that you have had threats from them, but is it really worth worrying about? Germany couldn't organise a birthday party, let alone a cross-oceanic invasion of Britain."

Leonidas rested back in his chair, stretching.

"I do not take any enemy lightly, Mister Leonidas," Elizabeth replied curtly. "I believe it unwise to underestimate any threat- large or small- and have come to the conclusion that co-operation is the key to defeating Germany."

"And you?" Leonidas grunted, eyes on Kekkonen. He had heard of this one before; a shrewd diplomat and a force to be reckoned with. The man was a quiet and yet reserved figure, allowing his body language to give nothing away. He adjusted his glasses, allowing the light to catch on the thick bands.

"They are too far from Finnish lands to be any real threat, but I will support Elizabeth should she come under threat. While Germany is not a threat today, I would not see their influence grow any larger."

Leonidas nodded at Elizabeth.

"You have nothing to fear, you know. Germany has no navy- and you reside on an island."

"This is less about defence, Spartan- more about ensuring that they do not expand their influence upon the continent."

The Spartan king laughed.

“Germany, conquer lands? Their force is among the most paltry army in Europe.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Elizabeth smirked, “I hear Rome’s defences are pathetic at the moment. Haven’t you had dealings with them in the past? You must tell me how Cumae is doing at some point.”

Leonidas scowled.

“I should be back with my armies, I have real problems to address. If you two want to take part in idle chatter and pretend to be real rulers, that’s your choice. I’m leaving.”

Leonidas picked up his spear and left silently, closing the door behind him.

“Well, that went well.” Kekkonen mused.

“Don’t worry about him,” Elizabeth grinned, “He is too far away from us to be of any concern.”

“Then why invite him?” Kekkonen asked.

“I simply wanted to ascertain that he was not going to declare *peace* with Germany. Even an empty war with Sparta will force Hitler to keep forces garrisoned in the south east- leaving less men for you and I to deal with.”

“I see. So you *intended* to anger him?”

“Yes, actually. He will never declare peace with Germany now, not with that insult under his belt. He may even attack them directly, to demonstrate that Sparta is worth its reputation.”

Kekkonen raised an eyebrow, pausing for a moment.

"I think you place too much faith in your abilities of manipulation. Leonidas will do as he always does- he will fight, declare alliances and try to seize as much land as he can in the process. I'm not sure any man can steer the Spartan King against his will. He may well be knocking at *your* gate with an army eventually."

"Time will tell, old friend," Elizabeth mused, taking a sip from her drink. Kekkonen shrugged, picking up his own glass.

"Have you considered the situation in Iberia?" he asked, "I hear old Maria has been active of late, moving troops around the northern border. I would keep an eye on Hastings; exclaves like that must be managed carefully for them to grow."

"You think Maria would *attack*?"

"No," Kekkonen replied carefully, "but you should prepare for the eventuality. While she has no intention of invading at the moment, that may not be the case in another few hundred years. If I were a citizen of Hastings, I would feel a lot more comfortable with a ring of walls between me and the Portuguese."

Elizabeth paused, watching the way the light played on the surface of her glass. The lemon-scented drink was produced in Hastings, travelling all the way north via her trade ships. In truth, she had claimed the land in southern Europe simply because it was vacant at the time- she had been a younger woman then, and had no thoughts for distant centuries down the line when exclaves would need individual garrisons and governance.

“Maria isn’t exactly known for her skills on the battlefield, but she does have a knack for stumbling into lucky situations. I suppose adding defences there does make some sense, though I worry that bolstering the defences too much there would serve as provocation for an attack- a self-fulfilling prophecy, one might say?”

Kekkonen grinned.

“Ah, you are good at this game. It’s a case of finding the balance, of course.”

“Of course.”

—

Em wrung her hands, flicking between several views of the world on the monitor before her.

“I can’t believe it all turned *sour* so quickly,” she muttered, glancing at the screens. Nebuchadnezzar shrugged, turning off the drone footage of London he had been watching.

“War,” Em grunted, “War. All across North America, Europe and Africa. No clean alliances, just bloody melee wherever someone thinks they can make a quick buck or steal some land. I knew it would result in war, but I didn’t think it would happen so *soon*.”

“Perhaps that is just the nature of people,” Nebuchadnezzar shrugged, “Part of the human condition? Perhaps when humans gather around leaders, inevitably those leaders come into conflict for resources. We gave them leaders and time, and the rest fell into place.”

Em smirked.

“That’s a very pessimistic outlook, Nebby.”

“But perhaps an accurate one,” he intoned, looking back across Africa. He could see the smouldering fires of Hippo Regius, now nothing but an arrangement of dark stains on the landscape. Already there were Ashanti settlers picking their way across the terrain, looking for a space to call home. The ruins of older civilizations swept aside, giving life to the new. There was something beautiful about that, he supposed, a cycle.

“It will calm down in time,” he sighed, turning to another monitor, “but I suspect there will be far fewer civilizations standing when it does.”

## Chapter 13: The Battle of Hastings

## Northwest Iberia, 2635 BC

Elizabeth leaned back a little in the saddle, watching the 'battle' unfold below. Hastings stood at her back, a lone bastion of English pride on this southern peninsula. Around it hung the lands of Portugal- their flag hanging in every town and trading post from here to France in the northeast. English Hastings was a tiny but proud dash of red land against a curtain of Portuguese white. A town of red bricked buildings, sitting up against the coast of Iberia.

English soldiers charged down the hill with their weapons drawn, roaring as they leapt towards their foes. At the bottom of the hill, a line of Portuguese chariots struggled to turn around, a good number with wheels stuck in the muddy ridge they had tried to form up against. Elizabeth shook her head, watching the English soldiers reach their foes. It was all over rather quickly; the majority of the Portuguese men just surrendered. All in all, it was actually a bloodless confrontation- a few minor injuries from arrow wounds, but nothing that looked too bad.

Pausing to adjust her balance, Elizabeth pulled a letter from her pouch. She unfolded it to read it once again, a smirk crossing her face.

*My dearest Elizabeth,*

*If you will not cede Hastings to me peacefully, we will take it by force. This is not a fight you can win; no land may stand against the might of Portugal.*

*Your men shall be crushed beneath my chariot forces, your children tossed into the sea. Your horses will be slaughtered to feed my armies, and your dogs... well, I guess they can stay. I like dogs.*

*I forget where Hastings is again, but I'll tell my soldiers to march towards it and they'll hopefully know which way they are going. May my men slaughter you on the battlefield.*

*Ever faithful,*

*Maria of Portugal*

The queen of Portugal was quite clearly mad. Elizabeth had once considered that Maria might be trying to lull her into a false sense of security- the madness merely a ruse to trick others into lowering their defences... That being said, Maria's complete lack of economic, cultural or scientific work, her haphazard battlefield tactics, her unproductive core and her non-existent infrastructure made that theory extremely unlikely.

*Perhaps there are drawbacks to immortal leaders after all.*

In the other forms of government that a few rare extremists spoke of, leaders would change regularly. She of course had no tolerance for such nonsense on her own soil, but a few nations did at least entertain the prospect. How fresh leaders would be decided was a matter of debate, but she supposed that in this one case it might have been better for Portugal. Maria was a terrible stateswoman, and under such a government she would have long since been replaced.

*Mortal rulers? we may as well put babies and children in charge, for all the experience such fools would have in the role.*



Still, she supposed, the immortal leaders would replace each other eventually. Why, one day Elizabeth would conquer all of these lands- and then the Portuguese people *would* have a better ruler. Perhaps there would only be *one* ruler, eventually. She chuckled at the thought of it.

She looked back at Hastings, that proud city on the hill. Kekkonen had been right about the need to defend it, but she had not gone so far as to build a wall around it as he had suggested. Instead she defended it through force of arms alone- several catapults in the city proper, surrounded with archers and warriors. The difficult terrain was barrier enough- a city like Hastings needed men, not mortar.

She had built this place up in preparation for at least a *competent* adversary- but what did Maria send? A line of chariots that couldn't navigate the forested terrain, and a squad of archers on the wrong side of the mountain. Elizabeth had even had a fleet marshalled off the coast in case Maria tried a naval landing, but that seemed hardly likely.

And yet here the Portuguese soldiers were; unable to get anywhere near the city proper and lacking even a single siege engine. It was almost laughable. Elizabeth was half tempted to have the ships sail south to harass Lisbon. It would serve Maria right for her idiocy.

Suppressing a grin, she wheeled her horse around and cantered back to town. Soldiers nodded at her in a sign of respect, many bowing and calling out well-wishes. She left her mount at the stables; the hands there were skilled with their trade. They quickly lead her horse to its stall, already preparing to give it a good rubbing down.

“Quite the battle out there, if you don’t mind me saying so, m’lady,” said one of the stable-boys.

“Quite,” Elizabeth replied, “I don’t think I’ll be staying much longer, not if that is all Maria has to throw at us! I have enjoyed your service, however.”

She tossed a coin at the small boy in thanks. He cheered and darted off up the street, probably off to spend it on something he shouldn’t. Allowing herself a small smile, she continued on her way.

It was only a short walk from there to the town hall; a hidden door leading her up a flight of stairs and straight to her office. It looked inconspicuous enough from the street, but an assailant would need to take down no fewer than fourteen men to reach the office. A number of her footmen carried hidden weapons too. Elizabeth was perhaps a little *too* wary of the Portuguese border.

Closing the great doors behind her, she sat down at her desk, and paused for a moment to simply enjoy the view of the harbour. The town cast long shadows across the water, as if reaching north for Britain. It was of course far too distant to be visible from here, but she found herself looking wistfully at that horizon sometimes.

She had built a functional seat of government out here; one from which she could direct her entire nation. At the slightest whim, she could have a letter on a boat headed to London within the hour. Regular messages arrived each week, detailing grain supplies, arms shipments and all of the documents necessary to run a kingdom from afar. She had thought it prudent to stay here personally during the ‘siege’, but it had all been somewhat pointless in the end.

She dabbed her quill in the ink pot, pausing for a moment to think over her response. It was a fine quill she held; made of swan feather. The queen's bird, some called it, and rightly so. There was no other bird quite so regal in all of England. Mulling it over, she began to write.

*My dearest Maria,*

*Hastings is and will always remain English soil. My men have repulsed that 'invasion' you directed to my border- I believe it would be satisfying for you to know that many of them surrendered the moment my men drew close enough to engage.*

*Despite the fact that the German soldiers lie on the wrong side of an ocean and belong to a nation without a navy, I find them to be a more troubling force than your own.*

*Should you ever remember where exactly Hastings is located- I suggest consulting a map- I would be happy to receive you for peace negotiations. It is time this laughable affair is ended.*

*Ever faithful,*

*Elizabeth I of England.*

She paused for a moment, reading it through several times to ensure that the language was crisp and without error. She did enjoy the condescending tone she took with Maria, though she would never admit that to anyone else. After checking the letter through several times, she found herself examining her own signature carefully.

She was never quite certain why she signed her name like that. It was always *Elizabeth I* rather than simply *Elizabeth*, through some force of habit. She had tried to stop it at one point but found herself unable to

do so. Why append the numeral? There had been no other Elizabeth who ruled England, surely? There never *would* be a second of course, considering her immortality.

Perhaps it was a pronoun- *I of England*, in that she embodied England as a living, breathing entity. That she was the guardian and guide of England, the protector of the realm. Yes, that was probably it.

Attempting to look back, to think to when she had started signing her name that way resulted in... fuzziness. It stretched back over one and a half thousand years, to before the period when the history books simply *began*, as though there had been no history beforehand. What had happened in those dark years? There were a few hints, a few memories of the days that came before. Precious fragments of a history lost forever.

Shaking her head, she dried the letter with sand and sealed it, already standing to place it in the receptacle for missives on the shelf before her. From there it would be retrieved by a courier- and would be on a fast horse south before nightfall. And from there to Maria the Mad, assuming she could understand the text at all.

*I, of England.*

## Chapter 14: The Twins

Outside Vijaya, 2590 BC

The twins rode through the darkness.

Dressed in robes of green, they became ghosts that flowed across the land. Their black horses snorted, charging across the dark earth. Their hooves broke through the cold soil, hurling it behind them into clouds of smoke as the twins rushed ever onwards. Great black trees hung overhead in arches around the road, brief gaps in the canopy filled with stars.

Trung Trac hung low to the mare, eyes on the lights in the distance. Two lines of torches out there; one almost a quarter mile distant and the other fast approaching. The closer lights would be the Vietnamese, but those up on the hill? Those were her target. Her long dark hair flared out behind her like a mantle, rippling as the horse powered forwards.

Nhi steadied her horse, reigning her in as they reached the battle lines. Vietnamese soldiers fell to their knees in welcome, clusters of them dropping in smooth gestures as they noticed the arrival of their leaders- but the twins remained silent until they had finished dismounting.

“What’s the situation here, captain?” Nhi asked, turning away from the horse.

“Much the same as when the missive was sent”, the captain replied, a gruff individual of short stature. “The fortress here holds strong. A good number of the civilians have fled- the siege forced a good

number out through hunger, and we let them go- but the fortress is still holding. Who knows how they have enough food to last this long, but they're still cooped up in there."

"I see," she replied, rubbing her jaw.

"Sister," she said, nodding at Trac, "Are you ready?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

Nhi grinned, turning back to the amassed forces.

"This stalemate has gone on too long, and so the two of us have decided to personally intervene. We will not leave good soldiers idling in siege without end, it's time to finish this. Together we will break the fortress within the next hour."

The men cheered and began to prepare their weapons, but the captain looked shocked.

"Begging your pardon, my lady- but how will we manage that? I've been sieging the fort for a good few months now, and we've managed to stop several supply caravans, but those inside are not exhausted enough to merit storming the walls! Did you bring any additional troops?"

"Only the two of us," Nhi smirked, "But we will be sufficient. Gear up and prepare to ride; when you see the signal, charge the gate. That's an order."

The captain looked doubtful, but he nodded respectfully.

"As you say, my lady."

While Nhi made her preparations, Trac waved over a serving-man.

“Follow me, and bring that basket of arrows with you.”

The man obliged, simply obeying the orders without question. Trac stepped forwards silently, dropping to one knee on a grassy hillock fifty feet ahead of the main party. The sun would be rising in about an hour, and dark blues were beginning to wash across the sky in watercolour streaks. The black walls of the castle stood out in the dawn light, the walls holding back the day just a little longer. Every so often, light glinted from a sword or helmet in the distance.

Trac reached into her satchel, pulling out a strange device of metal and glass.

“If I may ask, my lady,” the serving-man asked, “what is that?”

Trac smiled, pausing to turn it over in her hands.

“A telescope. With one of these, one may see great distances. In a few years I will see that every captain in our army is outfitted with such tools- but for now only a few have been made. They allow the bearer to see for miles.”

She held it up to her eye, peering into the gloom. The light was low, but even at a hundred paces she could make out the purple flags that flew over that castle. They bore the crest of the Champa, the fools that governed these lands.

*Not for long.*

Pausing for a moment, she strung her bow; black wood with elaborate carvings along the length of it. It had served her well in many a battle, and would do so today. She stretched the long sinews around the ends of the frame, tying them quickly with practised ease. She tested the weight of it, pulling the string back with satisfaction.

Laying it aside for a moment to glance through the telescope, she sighted her marks.

“Tell my sister that I am ready,” Trac stated, keeping her eyes firmly on the distant fort.

“At once,” the serving man replied, dashing off to deliver the message.

The moment she heard this, Nhi mounted her horse and rode silently forwards. Her horse’s hooves made little noise; wrapped as they were in cloth to muffle the sound. She hung low against the animal’s back, checking her weapons one by one.

The night was eerily quiet- it was too early for all but watchmen, and even those would be tired and inattentive. A new moon hung low in the sky, giving little illumination. This was the best time- the only time- for the kind of attack that they were planning.

She reached the bottom of the wall without any cry of alert from above. Barely pausing to scan the top of it for sentries, she dismounted silently, unhooking a small coil of dark rope from her belt. It was perfectly smooth, running through her fingers easily as she shook out some slack.

Gazing up at the wall, she picked a crenulation and threw a loop of rope over the top of it. She tugged on the two ends for a moment, to check that it would hold her weight. Satisfied, she gripped them both in her left and drew her sword with her right, gesturing back at the camp with it.



Several hundred yards away, Trung Trac saw the glint of dawn-light against her sister's blade. Wasting no time, she drew arrow to cheek in one smooth movement, pulling her arm up to forty five degrees.

Back at the wall, Nhi slapped the horse's rump and jumped. The horse sprinted away, yanking one end of the rope with it- Nhi held on to the other and flew up the wall, sprinting vertically in a mad ascent. She leapt into the air above the castle, letting go of the rope and drawing her second sword as she dropped atop the battlements.

She heard the first arrow reach its target long before she reached the top of the wall- that would be the commanding officer. Two more hit their targets soon after; she spotted two guards on the west wall collapse with shafts sprouting from their neck. Grinning, she sprinted for the gatehouse.

"What was that?" a man yelled, running out of the archway up ahead. "An intruder!"

*Ah well, I suppose no attack ever goes perfectly.*

The man lifted a crude axe, lumbering toward her. Nhi dashed forwards before he could even raise it, whipping her sword across his neck in an all-too practised gesture. She did not slow or stop, and was through the archway before he had even managed to hit the ground.

Sprinting into the gatehouse, she took the steps two at a time, no longer caring about sound. Most of the fort would have heard that shout, and so they would probably be...

Four guards blocked her way, but she made short work of them. She barely even thought about it as she hacked her way through, more weapon than human.

Back at the ridge, the Vietnamese soldiers stood in their stirrups, peering out at the castle.

“A horse, my lady!” one of the soldiers shouted, pointing at it. The black horse cantered into camp, trailing a rope behind it. It snorted nervously, but one of the men went out to calm it down.

“That’s the signal,” Trac shouted, “Charge the gate!”

The men roared, racing forwards on their mounts. The walls drew closer, casting shadow across the troops as the dawn light broke across the horizon. Expressions of fear turned to joy as the gates opened before them, admitting the Vietnamese force.

At the far end of the courtyard, terrified Chamic soldiers were forming up in lines with their weapons, faces confused and tired. They glanced around, as if looking for some kind of commanding officer- but none was present, of course. The Vietnamese seemed a terrifying force to them, all mounted with an immortal at the fore.

Nhi emerged from the shadows, slipping out of a gatehouse window and vaulting into the courtyard. She darted forward, climbing on to the back of her sister’s horse. As if by instinct, the horse reared and the twins drew all four of their swords, brandishing them outwards like some mythic beast of ruin.

They roared a wordless battle cry with a single voice, doubled and magnified by time and power. Their voice echoed around those walls, sinking into every soldier who stood against them.

And as the echoes faded, the soldiers began to advance.

Why did we give the Vietnamese *two* immortals?" Em asked, turning away from the screen momentarily. "It strikes me as a little unfair on the other nations."

"Well," Nebuchadnezzar began, "would *you* want to be the one to split them up? The one twin left on the sub would probably try and seize command of the ship or something."

Em nodded.

"I guess. There's the issue of the memory wipe as well; I doubt it would be effective on someone with such a strong bond. Looking at the two down there... they fight almost like a single unit, like one mind with two bodies."

"They do at that. No, I would not be the one to separate the Trung sisters- nor would I allow another to do so in my place. They fight as one."

## Chapter 15: The Crisis of Padan Plain

Rome, 2480 BC

Augustus Caesar poured over the map, his eyes sunken and his face haggard. He stood alone in the dark study, the light of a single candle casting long flickering shadows across the carved wooden walls. It gave only a meagre illumination across the parchment, well worn from many examinations on long dark nights like this.

How long had it been? Six hundred years since the fall of Neapolis? Time rolled forwards on black waves, a storm that grew ever more vicious with each passing year. Even so, he could remember the day Neapolis fell, his memories as fresh as blood on the snow. He remembered that long ride south, the smoke of the city forming a monument on the sky behind him. He had vowed to retake the city in the years since, restore Rome to its former glory- but the border had done nothing but retreat ever since.

He straightened the map, glancing across the northern end of it. Neapolis was marked in blue, as it had been for generations. There was no Roman alive who remembered Neapolis as it had been, none but him.

Caesar pulled another document towards him- reports on raids north of Ravenna. It was much the same as it always was- unidentified men pouring out of the north, ransacking farmsteads and stealing livestock. It was not hard to imagine where they had originated. He traced a finger across the list of incidents, every one signifying countless families torn apart and livelihoods destroyed.

He had had to yield the mountain passes, retreating down into what many called the Padan Plain- a vast expanse of hills and lowlands that was all but impossible to defend. Rome no longer had the men to enforce a solid border across the northern end of it, not without mountains or another feature to shore up against as a natural wall. Who could say how many bandits were out there now, wandering the foothills and pillaging at will?

He rubbed his jaw thinking through a millennia of geopolitics. Where had it gone wrong? What could he have done to fix it, to save his people?

Pausing for a moment to think, he ran a thumb along the northern border of Rome, starting in the Alps and tracing eastwards to Cumae. Perhaps he had focussed too much on repelling the Spartans there, when he should have been guarding the mountain passes? Perhaps he should have built Neapolis further south, where it could be protected by the terrain?

He had asked himself these questions countless times, and his musing yielded no new answers. He could not, no matter how much he wished it, turn back time. He could only watch as the Roman borders crept back year by year towards the capital; every new treaty or skirmish costing them a little more ground, a little more life.

His eyes fell on the missive before him, and he read it again.

*This facade has gone on too long. Let it be known that Sparta and Portugal have declared war on the Roman Empire. It may take centuries, but by the end of this war an immortal will fall.*

The missive had been signed below by both Leonidas of Sparta and Maria of Portugal. He had no doubt as to their authenticity.

Portugal hardly worried him; their army was a joke that had not even managed to take that English colony they shared a border with. *Sparta*, however. The defence of Cumae in itself had gone well last time, but that was over a thousand years ago. The Spartan military of today was nothing like their ancestors. Spartan soldiers today were *refined*, not trained. Leonidas forged them personally, whittling away at their weaknesses until they became something more than mere men. They fought as a single unit now, without hesitation, mercy or respite. Could Rome possibly hold up against that kind of threat, in its weakened state?

Augustus uncorked his inkwell, preparing his quill.

*Alexios of Constantinople,*

*Dark times. Rome is in grave need of assistance, following a joint declaration of war by Sparta and Lisbon. Should we commit the men to Cumae, our northern border will be all but undefended and vulnerable- nor do we have any defence against a Portuguese maritime invasion. Rome humbly requests your aid as an allied nation of similar belief; and I too request your aid as a friend. I fear that without the help of the Byzantines, Rome itself will fall.*

*Your sincere and steadfast ally,*

*Augustus Caesar.*

It burned him to write such a missive, his pride screaming against such an action. But even so, the leader in him knew it to be their only course of action, their one route to salvation and the preservation of Rome.

He stood from the desk, pushing the chair inwards. After drying the ink, he folded the letter and hurried through the great oak doors of his office, down into the dark passages of the palace.

He needed no light, even at that hour; he knew the way. He burst into the messenger's department a few moments later, startling everyone in the room. There were a minimum of three couriers on duty at all hours of the night, in case of sudden emergencies, and that night he was glad of the infrastructure.

"A message, sir?" one of the men asked, standing to receive the missive.

"Yes. See this delivered to Alexios of the Byzantines, as soon as possible."

"Right away, sir!" the messenger chimed, grabbing his gear and heading for the stables.

Caesar watched the messenger depart, a troubled expression on his face.

Would it be enough? There was no second plan; no nation that would come to their aid. Enemies all around, and every one stronger than Rome herself. And if the unthinkable happened... if Rome *did* fall, what would happen to him?

Laughing bitterly, he reached for the wine and began to plan his defences.

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It was no easy journey from Rome to Constantinople, not with Sparta on the horizon. The messenger was forced to head south and travel by sea, rowing under cover of darkness with no flag or sails. Spartan ships patrolled much of the eastern Mediterranean, and he had to trust to a low vessel with swift oars to see his message through those waters. Many nights were spent on careful diversions, circumventing Spartan scouts and other hazards.

Two weeks passed in the blink of an eye, the Spartans already forming up on the ridge outside of Cumae as their ancestors had long before them. Out on the Roman side, the mood was none so steadfast as it had been all those years ago- the iron soldiers of old had been replaced with worried youths, men with little fighting experience or faith in the might of Rome. Some told stories of the times before- of the Roman heroes who held that land and given no quarter, repelling Spartan assault night after night with skill and discipline.

The men who held those posts now, however, were of no such quality. These were conscripts; men who had only weeks ago been farming and raising cattle. And they were frightened.

It was on the fifteenth day that the message reached its destination- the courier ascending the polished white stone steps of the palace at Constantinople. Great statues flanked the promenade in the Byzantine style. Yet even there, the sign of war were omnipresent- Spartan forces stood a mere ten miles from the city, raiding impoverished villages and farms. The people of Constantinople had a hardened look to them; as though all smoothness had been eroded down through years of fighting and retreat.



The messenger was exhausted, but he did not stop for rest. Not until he had knocked on those great doors of the Byzantine palace and delivered his quarry. From there the letter passed on to another, carried on through the building and into the hands of a second immortal.

Alexios rested his goblet on the table, inspecting the letter carefully. It was creased and slightly damp on one corner, but bore the unmistakable sigil of Augustus Caesar.

He opened it without hesitation, reading the text through several times and memorising it before tossing it into the fireplace as was his way. He watched the flames consume it, mulling over the contents carefully.

*Old Caesar is in trouble, eh?*

He retrieved his own writing equipment, and prepared a response. It was a moment before he could bring himself to begin.

*My old friend,*

*You have my condolences in this matter. I am currently fighting Sparta myself; as we speak Byzantine soldiers trade blows from Ohrid to Nicomedia. Rest assured that we are fully committed to fighting the danger that they present, and that at least half of their forces will be engaged in the east. My people fight to ensure the very existence of Byzantium.*

*However, there is little I can do regarding the threat of Portugal in the west. As I'm sure your messenger will attest upon his return, the journey from Constantinople to Rome is not easy for a lone man, let*

*alone an army. Spartan forces patrol the border constantly- and the war goes badly here. There is simply no way for Byzantium to assist you in the west. I recommend setting watch fires along your coast to check for Portuguese ships.*

*I pray that we may yet meet again.*

*Your friend,*

*Alexios of Byzantium.*

## Chapter 16: When the Bosphorus Runs Red

SS Observer, 2370 BC

Forty years rolled past as the world turned; scarring Europe with the clouds of war. The land heaved and broiled with the clash of weapons and the loss of life. Yet those forty years passed by the waters of the Southern Ocean with only the faintest of whispers; the frozen world untouched by the death beyond.

The cold of the Antarctic seemed to seep into everything. Around Em, the air was absolutely frigid, her breath frosting the glass before her. It made her feel refreshed. It was not often these days that she left the warm confines of the observation deck, but she had made it a habit. It was good to remind herself that there was a real world out there; that the nations that fought and wrestled one another outside were actual people, not mere dots on a screen and numbers in a database.

She placed one hand against the porthole, looking out into the deep ocean. The lights of the ship revealed little beyond the glass; but there were krill and lichen out there; tangible evidence of a real and living world. The Southern Ocean seemed so peaceful, a contrast to the near-constant bloodshed the drones and satellites informed her of in the lands beyond.

“Not much of a view, is it?” a voice asked.

Em turned, nodding at the new arrival.

“Oh, it’s you, Semiramis; you made me jump there.”

"Sorry about that," she replied, "I like to get away from the library sometimes; it can be so claustrophobic down there."

Semiramis and Em were polar opposites. Where Semiramis was short and sturdy, Em was tall and gangly. Where Semiramis was bookish; Em was adventurous. Cautious to hasty, calculated to instinctual. And yet, the two were good friends, and had been for millennia.

"So, have you been following the fighting outside?" Semiramis asked. It was a rhetorical question of course; more an opening to conversation.

"Yeah. Europe is... *interesting* right now." Em replied.

"That's one word for it!" Semiramis chuckled, "It seems the library does nothing but chronicle all the battles these days. Rome is on the retreat, and *Constantinople itself* could fall any day now."

"I know," Em replied glumly, gazing out of the window again. "I had hoped they would do well."

Semiramis raised an eyebrow.

"You think they could have eventually developed a means to stop the *Event*? Their technology wasn't that impressive for the..."

"It wasn't that," Em interjected, "I just *liked* the Byzantines. They governed justly, and were more peaceful than most of their neighbours. They were men of reason and intellect."

"True," Semiramis replied, "But it can't last forever. None of the nations can- not even if they were to conquer the entire world and hold it all under one immortal. Even then, there is the Event to consider."

"I suppose you are right. I just wish their fall didn't have to be so soon. If anything, it should have been them asking the Romans for aid, not the other way round."

"It's just the way things are," Semiramis muttered, waving a hand dismissively. "I for one try not to get too tied up in worrying about nations and politics- I'm just looking forward to the technological developments in the coming years. Korea is looking very promising... not really surprising, with Sejong in charge."

"Of course."

After a while, Em excused herself and left. She turned away from the glass, heading down for the long dark staircase that led into the depths of the vessel. The metal clanked underfoot, a rhythmic beat as she worked her way back into the control room at the heart of the ship. Opening the great door carefully, she climbed inside.

Nebuchadnezzar nodded as she entered, busy examining some detail on the monitor in front of him.

"There is an assault on Constantinople tonight." he intoned, "Prepare to bring Alexios in, if we have to."

She nodded grimly, and pulled her chair over to the desk. Flicking the controls one by one, she gazed out across the world, and watched the battle unfold.

—

Flames raked at the walls of Constantinople like the claws of a titanic beast. The Spartan army boiled through a breach, shouting and cheering as they raced on into the city. The earth heaved and shook

as the great statues fell one by one; marble carvings of inventors and artists crumbling beneath Spartan hammer blow.

Alexios clutched his balcony with white-knuckled hands, tears streaming down his face as he beheld the ruin of his people. How could it have come to this?

Screams called up from below as Spartan soldiers hacked through a knot of Byzantine soldiers, some of the few who still held their posts. They would be upon the palace in minutes.

Alexios flinched back from his balcony as an arrow whisked past him, embedding itself in a painting behind.

"My lord! It is not safe here, we have to make for the coast!" a serving man cried, "*My lord!*"

"I make for the *battlefield*," he snarled, grabbing his sword.

Alexios threw a cloak around his shoulders, his hands trembling as he fumbled with the knots. Leonidas was out there, somewhere. He could feel it. Like two magnets drawn together, he felt compelled to go and seek him out. Some part of him knew it was folly; that a brute like Leonidas would trample him into the dirt without a moment's hesitation- but he had to do it. He owed as much to his people; how could he rule Byzantium and command men to their deaths, if he was not willing to do the same?

He bustled through the palace, flanked by what remained of the guards. He could hear the crashes down below as a battering ram smashed against the palace gate time and time again, ancient timbers creaking under the weight of mighty blows.

Terror pumping through his body in great gusts, Alexios stood before that gate, and did not blink when the great doors exploded inwards. Great clouds of dust and sand rose as they collapsed, wreathing the Spartan attackers and transforming them into silhouetted nightmares, rushing forwards into the courtyard.

Alexios was not even aware of drawing his sword. It was merely in his hand, as though it had been a part of his limb this entire time.

"For the Byzantines!" he roared, lunging for a Spartan.

The soldier caught the weapon with his shield, but did not offer any counter-attack. He ducked away, instead charging another Byzantine soldier down a corridor.

Alexios growled, swiping at another- the Spartan parried effortlessly, but again would not come closer. He backed up a little, heading after another target.

*They won't fight me?*

Abruptly, Alexios became aware that the soldiers in the door were separating, forming a corridor of men that led out into the city streets.

"You," a voice boomed, "are mine, and mine alone."

An immortal strode forth; eyes hidden behind a helm of cold metal. He wore the same heavy armour as the men around him- and yet he moved as if he carried no weight at all. It was as though the metal had become a part of his flesh in some way, merely another layer of skin.

Leonidas lifted his spear and shield, hunkering down into a ready stance.

Alexios did not wait. He flung himself to one side, the spear brushing the air where his heart had been moments before. He rolled wildly, scrabbling backwards as the spear struck again and again. One stab ripped his armour, scoring a deep gash across his chest. Alexios gasped and gripped the wound, only to look up as the Spartan king towered over him.

“Where is your honour?” Leonidas hissed.

He spun the weapon, the end catching Alexios across the temple. The lights flashed as he hit the ground hard, the bitter taste of blood on his lips.

“Where is your pride?”

Leonidas kicked him in the chest, forcing him into a ball as the air rushed out of his lungs.

“You have no right to rule these lands. I claim Constantinople, and all the lands from here to the eastern Mediterranean. And I claim your throne.”

Leonidas raised his spear high over his head. He paused, as if wondering what would happen when he brought it down.

Alexios’ body began to glow with a cold blue light. It was faint, but as he held one hand up in front of him, some memory flashed in his mind. It was of a distant time and place, perhaps even a different world.

*Not yet.*



He rolled to one side, the spear missing his body by inches. Suddenly there were Byzantine soldiers all around, rushing in from the streets beyond the breach.

*"Save the emperor!"* someone called, tackling Leonidas' legs out from under him. The Spartan king roared like a beast, beheading the man with one jab of his spear, but there were others soon after him, men sacrificing their lives to give Alexios what precious seconds they could.

Alexios scrambled to his feet. His clothes were torn and haggard, his breathing laboured- but he was alive. He half-ran, half-limped into the streets, stumbling out into the crumbling city. The glow faded as he moved, but Alexios somehow knew that he had come very close to death- or whatever the equivalent of death was for those who were immortal.

Surprising even himself, he wrenched a Spartan man out of a horse's saddle and leapt atop the animal. He wheeled it around, charging for the city gates.

*Antioch. I must flee to Antioch.*

His mind aflame with grief, the emperor fled.

## Chapter 17: Atop the Tiered City

Machu, 2300 BC

Pachacuti stood atop the crown of his nation. From the city of Machu, up on the peaks that framed the west; the world was laid out below him like a great quilt. From here he could see for miles, the mountains of the Andes giving way to rolling hills and forest in the east, jungle that spread on and on to the distant ocean far beyond. The sun was just beginning its decline behind him, sending ripples of orange and red across the dense growth below. Up there, he felt like king of all the world.

This was not the case, of course. The lands out south and east were contested by Argentina and Brazil, though in a good-natured, neighbourly sort of way. Oh, there was the odd scuffle with a handful of warriors, but in general the three nations were content with one another. It was all a game to them, a past-time to while away the centuries. The borders had never *actually* moved, for all their humorous feints and posturing.

Pachacuti stretched his arms, basking in the warmth of the last light of day. He ended every evening like this, at least when he could- feeling the sun across his shoulders and welcoming the next turn of the world. Tonight was special- it marked exactly 1700 years since the dawn of the Incan civilization, and he had a great celebration planned.

Behind him, the sun dipped slowly behind the mountains, sending a saw-toothed shadow across the land in a rapid wave. He watched the light recede into the distance, and grinned- it was time.

Bonfires blossomed into view below, and echoing cheers rolled up towards him. He laughed, sprinting down the steps two at a time to join them in their revelry.

It was a glorious night. The hunters returned from the mountains with Taruca and Pudu deer, and the people feasted on spiced venison and chicha. Young and old joined the celebration from the four corners of the realm. Many came from Cusco, the hidden capital in the mountains- but there were even some from Huamanga out on the Pacific coast, or up from Tiwanaku. Truly, this was a day for all to enjoy. Pachacuti moved among the crowds, nodding in greeting to those he knew. A great many familiar faces were here tonight.

He paused out near the bonfires, sensing the faint prickle of being watched. Turning, he noticed a young child- she couldn't have been five years old. The girl stared at him warily from behind her mother's dress.

"Ma, is that the *Sapa Inca*? What's it like to live forever?"

Pachacuti smiled, kneeling down to look the girl in the eye.

"I haven't lived forever yet; I'm only about one thousand, seven hundred years old. When I have actually lived *forever*, I'll let you know."

Reaching onto the feast-day table behind him, he tossed the girl an apple. She caught it with a grin.

"You're funny."

"I noticed."

Nodding at the mother, who looked highly embarrassed, he left.

The festival was truly wondrous. Various events were held among the people- competitions of strength and speed, archery and swordplay. Pachacuti did not take part directly- it would not be a fair game, in several of the contests- but he enjoyed watching the footraces and all the other events. Pachacuti had one of his artists sketch the occasion, so that it could later be immortalised in a wall carving.

The drinks flowed freely around the bonfires, and so did the stories that came with them. Tales of old rivalries between neighbouring farms, fishing adventures out in the Pacific and wonders seen while wandering the unexplored parts of the Andes. A trader among them had once sailed through the mighty canal in the north, a canal that linked ocean to ocean and passed through a great city of the Buccaneers. According to him, the islands beyond were strange lands, but they produced the finest drink in the world.

Another had once visited the deep south, and stayed with the reclusive Chileans. A sailor, whose vessel had been blown off course by a storm, forced to seek shelter. He spoke of strange customs, and cities built in a desert drier than the west wind.

After the children were sent to their beds, the adults gathered around the greatest of the bonfires. The cold was strong in this part of the mountains, but drinks and fire warmed their bones. All grew silent as the old storyteller emerged from her hut, supported by a cane. Her face was aged but bright, her eyes holding a youthful happiness that her earthly shell did not.

Her cloak swept around her as she took his seat at the great firepit.

"I bring tales of ages long past," she began.

She spoke with a deep voice laden with gravel, as though her words were the breath of time itself. The storyteller couldn't have been a twentieth of Pachacuti's age, but even he found himself enthralled.

"Ages that none may yet remember- save for those who cannot die. Ages where men fought not with weapons of iron or bronze, but with those of simple stone. I speak of the ages before even this fair city was raised from the mountain."

Her eyes lingered on Pachacuti for a moment before she continued.

"The tale of the immortal Henry Morgan, and how he conquered the seas. The tale of Lincoln, and his wars with the Lone Star. Tales of the ice-folk, and their kingdom of the night."

The festival-goers hung on to her every word.

"What of the wise man Cathol, and his prophecies of the North?" she asked, raising her hands to the assembled crowd. "The man who will live thrice, and his war against the pale flag?"

"Not that one," a young man grumbled, "Religious mumbo-jumbo, all of it. Give us a *real* story."

"You must be very learned and travelled for one so young. Who are we to say which stories are real, and which are not? There are people in the north who would kill a man for calling the words of Cathol such."

The man flushed, looking indignant.

"Still, that is not the tale I will tell tonight. Tonight I speak of the Incan lands as they were over a thousand years ago- when our nation was

yet young and the lands untamed. When these lands were but an empty area on a map, did Manqu the scout live.”

The storyteller stood, eyes distant as though seeing beyond the faces of those assembled around her, as though staring into the past itself.

“Manqu had been charged by the Sapa Inca himself to scout these lands, to find a place for our people to call home. He travelled many miles through the thick jungle, an arduous passage then with no roads to guide him. From mountain to mountain he climbed, scouting valley after valley for a place to call home.”

The storyteller paused, sweeping his hand along the mountainous horizon.

“He spent years travelling, searching for the perfect location. He charted and mapped every face of these peaks, climbing and recording their shape and form. Until, at last he came upon the mountain on which we now stand. As Manqu stared up at the slopes, he was taken by a vision- a vision of a fair city built atop these stones; the hills terraced into farms that food may be bountiful, and yea, even the bonfires of celebration on the ground upon which we stand.

He sent word to Cusco immediately, that those who sought a new life in the jungle might join him. And join they did- at first a trickle, but then in droves. Those who arrived shared Manqu’s vision, and called forth their families and friends. In time, we carved this land into a mighty city, the pride of all Inca land.”

There was a moment’s pause.

“Is that a true story?” someone asked, a young woman a ways to the back.

Pachacuti nodded.

“I remember Manqu. He was about your age when I sent him out this way, actually- a young Incan with his eyes firmly on the horizon. A good man; he raised a family here in time. Who knows, perhaps his flesh and blood sits with us tonight, as his spirit does.”

There were murmurs of wonder at that. None could trace their ancestry back that far of course, but those present could indeed feel the spirit of Manqu among them, sharing in their celebration and marvelling at his vision come true.

As the evening rolled on, conversations turned to light murmur. Some bade their farewells, heading for homes or farmsteads. Beds were offered to those who had travelled far and were accepted with many thanks. The sound of the festival faded down to a contented hush, those who remained simply relaxing and watching the embers.

And far above them, the stars rolled past in their slow dance as the world continued to turn.

## Chapter 18: The Bringer of Ruin

### The Remains of Hippo Regius, 2240 BC

King Osei ran his hands along the wall. Ivy clung to every surface here, tendrils snaking around pillars and choking what few blackened buildings remained. Time pulled at everything, loosening mortar and stone as it reduced the once-great towers of Hippo Regius to mere rubble and scree.

He turned left, following an ancient memory. A memory of when this city had been proud and strong, these barren streets filled with people. The main road still existed to some degree. Overgrowth marred the edges, but it was still the fastest way to navigate what was left.

Osei had broken this place. Had it really been right for him to do it? The Carthaginians had built the city long ago, on land that did not belong to them. It should never have been built in the first place. Even so, the people who had lived here were *not* responsible for the actions of their rulers. These ruins had once housed farmers and craftsmen, not soldiers.

The maze abruptly opened, leading him into a courtyard. Broken pillars lay across the ground, pinned by foliage. In places great ironwood trees had grown, cracking the irregular paving slabs and reaching into the sky. Some had to be over eighty feet tall.

If his memory was correct- and it usually was- the broken building at the fore of the plaza was the remnants of the local government buildings, the highest authority in the city. Osei felt a grim sense of



unease as he walked towards the husk, skirting around dark holes in the ground. Ruin had spread through here like a disease, cracking and breaking through stone with nought but the weapon of time.

The great doors of the building were gone. They had long since rotted into nothing, assuming they had survived the war that claimed the rest of the city. Fires had claimed much of it during the fall, after the looting and fighting had subsided.

He stepped through the archway carefully, into the building itself.

Little had survived beyond the outer walls. In places, only a waist-high line of rubble signified where rooms had been. Moss and lichens clung to every surface, circling crumbling remnants of pillars and archways. Osei surveyed the wreckage with a heart of ice, simply observing the destruction.

A tall figure caught his attention, shrouded in black. It seemed to be staring at him, standing silently in the gloom.

He froze, spinning towards the man- no, it was a *statue*. He walked over to it slowly, still on guard from sheer unease. The thing had been weathered by centuries of rain and was barely recognisable, black mould covering much of where the face had been.

He brushed some dirt away from the pedestal, and read the text there. It depicted the former governor of this city apparently, but most of his name had been chipped away. His full title was lost to history.

He paused for a moment, glaring at where the eyes of the statue had once been.

*It was necessary. Destroying this place was the only way I could ensure the Ashanti people had room to live and grow, to grow old and die.*

And yet, that faceless statue haunted him. An echo of an echo, the legacy of Llaningard looming over him like a nightmarish creature. It mocked him, demonstrating the greatness of what had come before, the ruin that all would one day turn to.

Overcome by anger, he threw his weight against it. The aged stone cracked, shuddering as he rammed into it again and again. On the fourth impact, the knees of the statue broke, toppling backwards. The sickening crack jolted him, the body collapsing and crumbling into a dozen pieces at the feet of the king.

Osei did not look back, striding out of that building with his mind burning hotter than the ancient flames that had taken this city.

*I am a good leader; a good man. It gave my people land to live, it gave my enemies a message. I had the livelihoods of his people at heart, that was why. I did it because I had to. It was the only way.*

But it hadn't worked, had it? The Bringer of Ruin, they called him. Oathbreaker, Innocent Slayer. And some part of him knew he deserved the titles.

He strode straight back to the old city square, resisting the urge to sprint from that haunted place. The ruins were but half a mile outside of the new city of Yeji, overlooking the South Atlantic. He had long considered having Hippo Regius' remnants torn down, but every time he went to do so something stayed his hand.

*Am I going mad?*

The strains were certainly there. Mali had declared war last night- their forces skirting his border in the north. Carthage too held arms against him, marching alongside their neighbours. He should have been in the war room, delivering orders and marshalling the troops. But instead he was out here, wandering the wreckage of a city fallen.

*A stunt like that would only draw another challenger, and another, until the Atlantic turns red with the blood of your people... We are surrounded by powerful players in this great game.*

Kruger had seen it coming, damn the man. Osei was confident of his troops, but somewhere deep in his core the tendrils of maddened terror had taken root. The region was in uproar- every immortal from here to the Indian ocean was furious. Challenger after challenger from the north would come, a wave of men seeking to carry back the head of the Bringer of Ruin. He could see it all; a tide wiping the Ashanti from the map in a bloody sweep.

*And who then will wander my ruins?* Osei wondered dryly, glancing back at the remnants of the government building. *Will others wander the streets of Kumasi, watching my statues crumble into nothing?*

It was a grim thought.

It was almost nightfall by the time he could bring himself to leave those ruins. It was a long walk, striding out from between those darkened places. Around him, the great walls were replaced by lines of broken rubble as he left the centre. In time, even those became open fields, shifting with nought but the wind.

Far above the lowland plains, overlooking the twin cities past and present, stood an army. Clouds of dust rose behind the advancing column like a bonfire, wreathing their forms in shadow. They were yet

hundreds of miles from the sea, but each day they marched yet closer to the Ashanti border. Spearmen and chariot archers advanced in long lines, stretching back to the horizon in an endless surge.

Musa Keita rode at the fore- immortal, and the ruler of his people. He stood tall, gripping the rim of the chariot with white-knuckled hands. He could almost taste the ancient fires on the wind, the blaze that had scourged Hippo Regius from this world. It had taken him almost a century to prepare his nation for war, but time was no object in the great game.

A horse rode up alongside him, handing a letter over without word. A message from the south; he recognised the seal of Paul Kruger on the envelope. He opened it silently, scanning the text.

*Musa-*

*I urge you to avoid this course of action. There is still time for peaceful negotiation with the Ashanti; this dispute does not need to turn to more bloodshed. Sheathe your swords, and let diplomacy take its course.*

*With respect-*

*Kruger*

He crumpled the letter in one fist, grinning. Kruger was quite right; there was time for peaceful negotiation- but he wanted none of it. He had long ago realised that such negotiations were merely a ploy for time on behalf of the Ashanti- they had not the men to defend the lengthy border, and they knew it.

He glanced behind him, watching the wheels of his chariots spin as they crossed the Sahel. They were steered by men faithful to him-

men who called him *Mansa*, king of the people. His men had trained their entire lives for this campaign- this moment. And he knew they would not let him down.

Yeji was far beyond sight for now. But he would come down upon those lands in a cleansing tide. No doubt crossed his heart; he simply knew of his impending success on the battlefield.

*Osei, the Bringer of Ruin shall be brought to justice. Hippo Regius will be avenged.*

And he was not alone in this venture. Almost a thousand miles to the east, the Carthaginians mirrored their descent southwards. Their force rode not on horseback, but on the backs of great war-elephants. The grey-skinned creatures lumbered onwards, pushed forwards by the hand of man. Their footsteps were as thunder, the ground shaking as they advanced towards the Ashanti borders. The great Hannibal himself rode among their number, directing his forces through the brush and lowlands with eyes to the south.

The time for minor skirmishes and underhanded dealings had past. This was the time for war.